



Sing Song at Black Sophie's

At daybreak for the isles

By

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Chapter 1

SING-SONG AT BLACK SOPHIE'S

*I took my liberty to go ashore,
And get filled up with "Cape
Smoke",
I thought I would never come back
any more,
Till I fetched up at old Black Sophie
There I met Maria Fine
With a face so young and gay,
She caused me to stay overtime
Way down South Afric-kay!*

JUST a song that came out of the fo'c's'le of an American clipper ship, a song that was heard wherever the clippers sailed. They were bellowing it under the flaring oil-lamps in Black Sophie's boarding-house, the dubious refuge which had inspired the song.

All the Alabama deserters were there, the whole island crowd, sailor men

from the merchant ships in Table Bay, and inevitably the loose girls of the establishment. The girls drove round Cape Town in smart open carriages with Black Sophie herself in attendance as the grinning caricature of a chaperon. They threw out visiting cards to likely and unlikely patrons, and almost daily they displayed their charms at the docks. Never a mail steamer departed without the blessing of Black Sophie and her entourage, for these were almost the only social occasions from which it was impossible to exclude them. Sailing days were great days on the Table Bay waterfront; and Black Sophie Was one of the characters of that vanished scene.

Now the girls were overwhelmed by male company. They formed the queer stew of types, white, olive, yellow and

brown, that you would expect to find in this seaport at the southern tip of Africa; some with clear origins, others lost in the seaport's past. Portuguese Lil with her dark eyes glittering. A girl with Chinese cheek-bones who came from Mauritius. Anna with the crinkled black hair, Rosie with the honey skin, buxom Sally with the blue eyes of an English father, proud Nancy whose hair was straight and Yellow. Sirens all, with their vivid dresses and magpie chatter.

“‘Allo sailormans. Nice sailormans. Ol’ sweetheart.” Just wantons of the waterfront, singing a waterfront song.

Captain Raphael Semmes, with the Alabama coaled and provisioned, had outstayed the hesitant official welcome at Simon's Bay. He was ready to leave for the last time, and he was blaming the Yankee Consul for the

desertions. In truth, Black Sophie and her girls had been holding the men and taking their dollars. Tonight drinks and dance and sing-song were free. It was one of those nights that had made Black Sophie famous in the ports of the world. Long after they had left the “Tavern of the Seas” these men would talk wistfully of the raw Cape brandy, the barrels of wine and beer. Where else were poor sailormen treated like this ?

Black Sophie, that strange hostess, belonged to a wild era. She was a Cape coloured woman,¹ dark as her nickname, a huge and powerful woman with a vivid personality. Her

¹ Her name was Sophia Johanna Werner, and according to records in the Deeds Office in Cape Town she was born at Graaff-Reinet in 1827. She married Charles Ludwig Nelson. They had no children.

boarding-house was no better than other Bree Street dives; but she had one redeeming trait – she was genuinely fond of the roistering sailors of her time.

So much did Black Sophie enjoy her own parties that she almost forgot the motive. She had married a Scandinavian skipper in the guano island trade. In this way she had become Mrs Nelson of 23, Bree Street. When her husband and other skippers needed crews, Black Sophie found them. Often enough she sent them away oblivious to their destinations, but always she provided them with sea boots and oilskins.

Black Sophie was thirty-six years old when the Alabama broke out the Southern colours and made her dramatic appearance in Table Bay with the Northern barque Sea Bride as

her prize. Cape Town favoured the South, for slavery had not long been abolished at the Cape; and the Alabama's men swaggered through the sunlit streets as heroes. For weeks the Alabama came and went mysteriously, taking thirteen more prizes, always returning with fresh tales of adventure.

Now it was late in September 1863 and the moon was nearing its full. All knew that soon the Alabama would be seen no more in Cape waters. Too many international complications had arisen, and Semmes had been given clear warning that he had used the naval harbour of Simon's Bay long enough. The deserters were waiting for news, and expecting it, in Black Sophie's saloon that night.

Black Sophie swung across to the piano in a roar of cheering. She had a

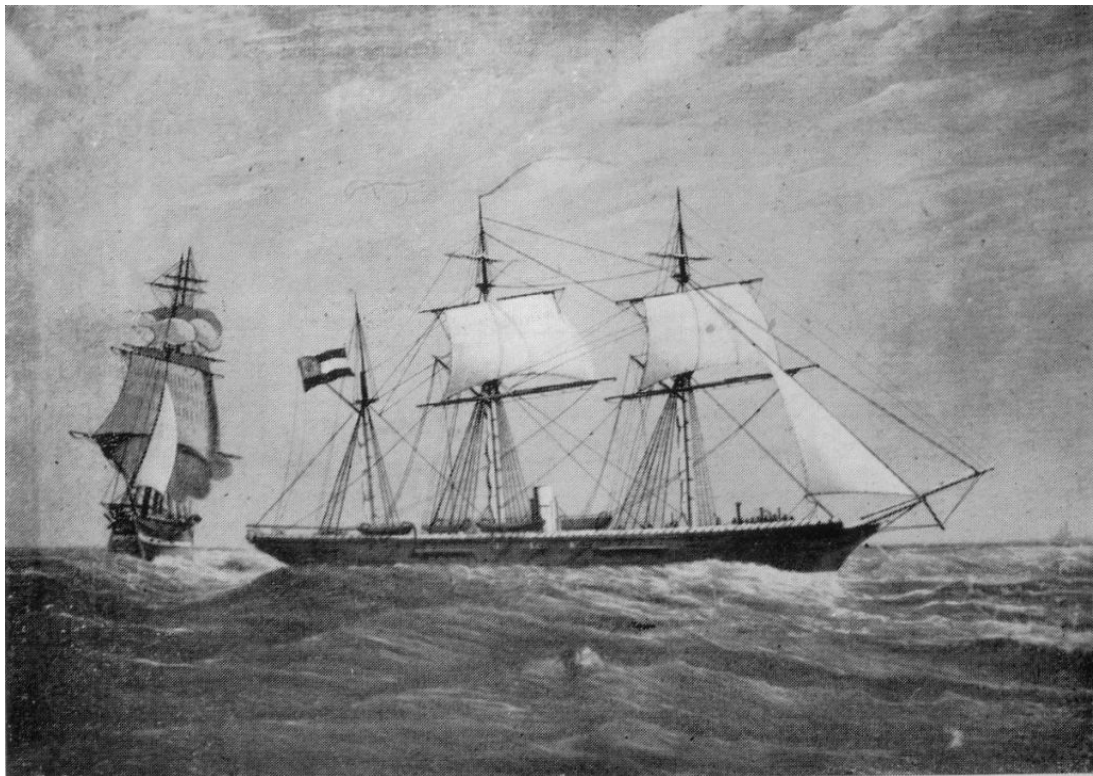


Captain Raphael Semmes of the Alabama

full orchestra, the traditional Cape orchestra, piano, concertina, violin and guitar. “Alabama boys – yuh give me the Black Sophie song,” she announced. “All-I-I right – I give yuh Cape Town’s song for the Alabama.”

They beat on the barrels in joyous approval, for this was a song they knew, a song that had come spontaneously from the throng that had watched the Alabama sail in, a song with a lilt and a song to remember.

Black Sophie’s deep voice reverberated through the smoke and the fumes. It was not the voice of an opera singer, but it had a certain quality and the feeling of a music-loving race. That night she might almost have known that Cape Town would still be singing the Alabama song nearly ninety years afterwards.



The Alabama entering Table Bay with the Northern barque Sea Bride as her prize.

*Daar kom die Alabama
Ver, ver oor die see
Daar kom die Alabama Ver,
Ver, ver oor die see.*

Never, they thought, had they heard such music, and never again would the Alabama song convey such meaning. They stamped out the rhythm and clasped their girls, filled their glasses and sang with Black Sophie.

*There comes the Alabama
Far, far across the sea,
There comes the Alabama
Far, far, far across the sea.*

That was their mood when one of Black Sophie's runners panted in at the Bree Street door. They guessed his message before he spoke.

"Gone!" declared the runner. "Telegraph from Simon's Town – Alabama gone!"

A link had snapped, and the Southerners knew there would be no homeward voyage for them while the Civil War lasted. Little they cared that night.

They were at home in Cape Town, and especially were they at home in the seafaring quarter. It was a town where white beachcombers lived on four pence a day. A small loaf cost a penny, and a huge boiled crawfish another penny; the rest of the money went on vaaljapie, a quart of young and intoxicating wine. Every night of the week the beachcombers sauntered carefree down Bree Street towards the cargo sheds where they found shelter, singing as they went:

*We own no house,
we own no lands,
We do not work to soil our
hands,*

For in that dangers lurk!
With bloody good luck,
We beg our tuck,
So hang the men who work!

If they yearned for a change of diet there were stalls on the flag stoned footpaths where red-fezzed Malays sold boiled penguin eggs at a penny each, little paper packets of the local bush tea sour figs, fish frikkadels and watermelon konfyt. Dop brandy was to be had for sixpence a bottle.

No wonder that seafaring men seldom went no further than Bree Street. If they had gone further they would have discovered the main street, the Heerengracht; but that street was for master mariners, who had their “Captains’ Rooms” and their garden at the corner of Strand Street and the Heerengracht. Deep in their own discussions, they sat there watching

the hansam-cabs clattering and jingling over the cobble-stones.

Bree Street was another world. It supplied all the needs of beach-combers and sailors. The lower part of Bree Street was as raffish as the Ratcliff Highway; a street where men from the ends of the earth met and drank and parted; a street that merged into blue water and led directly to every corner of the globe.

The inns and boarding-houses, Black Sophie’s and the rest, were sordid as only such taverns could be. In many of these places seamen were robbed, and always they received poor value for hard-earned pay. Yet these were the delights they dreamt of during long, cold watches in oilskins – palaces of brightness – where every hardship could be forgotten as the

bottles of “Cape smoke” were emptied and flung aside.

Black Sophie’s saloon was more picturesque than most, for her customers brought her gifts and the main room looked like a nautical museum. She had bead curtains and cushions and other knick-knacks never seen in fo’c’s’les. Hung on the walls were dried albatross feet and the carved and decorated backbones of sharks. Huge teeth of sperm whales had whaling scenes tattooed on them. There were delicate bone models of ships, with such fine detail from jib boom to stern rail that the work might have been done in ivory.

One exhibit which served a useful purpose was a weatherglass presented by an American admirer, a handsome piece of glass-blowing of the Cape Cod pattern designed for whaling

skippers. Shaped like a coffee-pot, it held coloured water which responded to changes of pressure. Black Sophie watched the rise and fall in the spout keenly when customers were outward bound, and told them what to expect.

Black Sophie’s flower-bowl was a sailing-ship’s compass stand supported by three beautifully-moulded dolphins. She had old ships’ lanterns, too, all polished for the dance. Famous house-flags lent colour to the bar, flags of tea and wool clippers, flags of fast Cape schooners, flags of the brigs that brought Rio coffee to Table Bay.

Strangest of all Black Sophie’s curios was contained in a box under the bar. The box was a rough coffin, and mercifully this exhibit was never set out in the open, but was displayed only on request. It was Jack Gove’s contribution to the nautical museum.

He was there that night, a bearded Scot with rings in his ears like the old-time sailor he was. Jack Gove, headman of Ichaboe Island, popular with his men and reputed to be the finest man on the coast when it came to handling whale-boats loaded with guano in heavy weather.

Jack Gove, however, was a bit of a ghoul. The soil of the guano islands, steeped in ammonia, has a peculiar effect on corpses. Men buried there become mummified, and Jack Gove carried on a trade in mummies. That was the curio under the bar, a shrivelled island labourer with the hair turned vivid red by the chemicals in the soil.

Such was the scene that had helped to place Black Sophie of Bree Street in the front rank of hostesses to the seafaring world. She was a legendary

figure indeed, like Bremen Mary of Iquique, Mother Rowley of Callao, Liverpool Annie and other lurid characters, notorious in greater or lesser degree.

On the white-washed walls of Black Sophie's saloon visitors able to write were permitted to leave their signatures and the names of their ships. Seafaring artists added fanciful designs, from full-rigged ships right down the scale to dancing girls with graceful curves all too seldom observed in the hell's kitchens of Bree Street.

One picture needed explanation. It was a long and wicked rock with the surf breaking over off-lying reefs; and, in the background, a barren coast. Seabirds wheeled over this forbidding scene, and seals thrust their whiskered faces above the angry surface of the ocean.

Beneath the mysterious picture sat Jack Gove, wearing a fur cap to add to his hairiness. He knew that scene on the wall well enough. It was Black Sophie Rock, one of the grim outcrops where the island men went sealing, a wicked place when the seas race in from the south-west, but aptly named. Black Sophie Rock, named by tough seal-hunters long ago, and firmly engraved on modern charts. Not often does a woman of Black Sophie's class leave her name on the map.

Jack Gove was drinking with the island crowd. Most of them wore sealskin waistcoats, badges of exile and trophies of their dangerous trade. All that evening, before the runner arrived with the Alabama news, they had been yarning about the islands. Jack Gove, Billy the Prussian, Pete the Russian, Big Oscar the Swede,

Cockney Jim, Bluenose Brown – few but the headmen had proper names, the rest were nicknames and often enough the owners preferred to leave their real names over the horizon when they signed for the islands.

They drank and yarned about the islands, their hardships almost forgotten, until it seemed they were longing to start another year of exile. They talked of the tons of guano they had scraped from those barren rocks, the sacks they had filled and humped, the ships they had loaded, the huts and tarpaulin shelters where they ate and slept. They spoke of the sealing on sea-swept ledges, on Dumfudgeon and Eighty-Four, the gullies and blinders and reefs of the lonely coast ... the sealing that meant a big pay-day if all went well.

“Py Yingo, dot vos a ‘knock-down’ mit der yearlings und klapmutches going down fast to der sea – two t’ousand in von day.

A strange lingo they spoke, and only an island man could follow it. They recalled the times when the nor’-west seas came up and the schooner was late with their supplies, and they measured the fresh water in the barrels ... and wondered. They talked of far harbours where they had fished for sharks and traded with the Hottentots. And the island dawns when the birds rose from their nests in multitudes and darkened the sky. The ships that had called, and some that had left their bones on the island beaches.

But mainly they talked of the men they had known. Savagely they remembered the long succession of crimps; those human sharks who had

profited by spiking the liquor and taking blood money for sending them off unconscious to sea in undermanned windjammers. Shanghai Brown of ‘Frisco, Paddy Doyle of Liverpool, Jim Brady of Antofagasta, and Jack Booze of the Table Bay waterfront. Black Sophie, who did very much the same thing, was different ... though they would have been hard put to it to explain why.

Respectfully they spoke of hard-case skippers. In the island trade there was Captain Benjamin Sinclair, a man of enormous strength, a one-eyed man who wore a white top-hat afloat and on shore. Sinclair often went inland by ox-wagon, deep into the West Coast no-man’s-land, on trading and prospecting ventures. It was said that his eye had been slashed out

accidentally by the flick of a driver's whip.

"Aye, old Sinclair – he gave his name to Sinclair's Island," declared Jack Gove. "It was Roast Beef Island when I first went there, wi' Plumpudding Island less than a mile away and Black Sophie Rock between the two. Then old Sinclair took possession of it for his firm and stuck up a notice saying it was Sinclair's Island and he'd shoot any mon he caught there poaching his seals and guano."

They liked best to talk of old shipmates and their friends of the islands. Only then was it possible to guess why the islands drew them back year after year. How often they had cursed those waterless isles under the fog, five hundred miles and more up the coast, isles reeking of guano and offering little but hard rations and

harder work. Every season, they had sworn, would be their last. Then came the wild pay-day and the delirious weeks until every penny had been spent.

Out in the bay there were deep-water ships waiting for crews. The island crowd were sailors almost to a man; they could have sailed to New York or Liverpool, east to Australia; the choice was their own. Tonight they were nearing the end of their time in town, and they knew what their choice would be.

A weird choice, with the world at the end of Bree Street, a strange decision. But the island crowd hung together. Sinclair's Island, Plumpudding, Pomona, Possession, Ichaboe, Mercury. ... Those islands have always fascinated certain men, and the spell is hard to analyse.

The old hands would go. As headman Jack Gove was counting on them. But he needed more men. He had put it to Black Sophie's husband, Skipper Nelson of the schooner Rover, and the skipper had talked to his wife. That was the motive behind the free drinks; that and Black Sophie's love' of a party.

Out in the bay the Rover had her stores on board and her canvas bent. Five hundred miles up the coast the long sou'-west swell was breaking over the dark and jagged fangs of the sealing ledges marked on the chart as Black Sophie Rock – the wicked black rock drawn so vividly on the white wall. The seas were beating against the whole string of islands, from Sinclair's and Plumpudding north to Ichaboe. Combers dashed into the cavern of Mercury so that the island shook like a

jelly. Still further north the seals barked on Hollam's Bird, an isle without a keeper. On most of the others men awaited relief and release – and talked longingly of the pleasures Black Sophie would offer when they sailed back to town. They still had fresh water, measured down to the last gallon. When that ran out there would be no more until the Rover landed fresh casks. It was time for the Rover to go.

Jack Gove chose his moment and walked over to the group of men the Alabama had left behind. "So yon Semmes has slung his hook, eh? What now, boys – what's the plan?"

"What else but shipping away again?" one of the deserters answered. "Time enough in a week or two. What else is there for a bunch of sailors?"

Jack Gove pulled at his pipe as though deep in thought. He had an air of authority, this grizzled Scot, sea-tanned and so clearly of their own trade. "Ship away in a lime-juicer, wull ye?" he murmured at last. "Or a Blue Nose, perhaps, wi' the mates hounding ye up aloft. Poor pay and starvation food. Aye, so ye're awa' to sea again ..."

The deserters looked at Jack Gove with serious faces. They knew what he meant. Going aloft on dark nights, clawing their way over the futtock shrouds to the swaying tops'l yard. Climbing out on the taut footrope with the sail tearing at their hands and only the cold ocean below. Frozen bodies, frozen fingers, splintered finger-nails.

"All hands close-reef the main tops'l!" They could almost hear the mate's voice. "Come on, you bloody

soldiers!" The Cape Horn wind cutting through sodden rags held together by soul-and-body lashings. Canvas booming and thundering. And the icy seas racing under them.

Wheel and look-out, look-out and wheel, and the binnacle lamp flickering. Never enough food, never enough sleep. Burned salt pork for breakfast. Cracker hash, mouldy potatoes and stinking salt pork again for dinner. Pound and pint and Liverpool pantiles, round and heavy and weevily. The dull green preserved beef called "salt horse", still bitter with the brine of years. Hard tack and belaying-pin soup. "Lee fore brace! Weather crojack brace!" Jack Gove had set their minds working. They saw it all and hated their thoughts. And then Jack Gove spoke again.

“D’ye fancy shore jobs for a spell? I’d say it would be better for you lads to lie quiet for a bit – get out of reach o’ trouble.”

“Can you fix it, mister?” They were eager. They had lived long enough in the reek of powder. Some called the Alabama a pirate, and sooner or later she would go the way of all pirates. All that was behind them. They lived again. If they could put the sea behind them as well ... a shore job sounded incredibly comfortable.

“I can fix up the lot of ye on the islands,” declared Jack Gove. “We sail at daybreak. Now lads, who’s for the islands?” Round the table the Alabama deserters looked at one another and broke into excited discussion. Some were for finishing their drinks and going aboard the Rover. One or two cautious fellows wanted to know more

about the islands. Jack Gove was ready for that.

“Only a few days up the coast – a grand life, good grub and all night in ye’re bunks.”

“And the pay, mister?”

“Fair enough pay for handling the guano. But when ye go sealing – that’s when ye make the money. Skipper Nelson will bring ye back here in a few month’s time, and I guarantee every man jack wull have fifty quid in his pocket – maybe eighty golden sovereigns if luck’s wi’ us.”

A wizened Southerner with watery blue eyes shook his head. “I’ve seen guano islands off Peru, and I never wish to clap eyes on one again,” he said firmly. “I’d sooner fight the Yankees than rot for months on a bone-dry island. No, I’ll ship before

the mast and stand my watch – and to hell with your dung-heaps and hard labour.”

There was an Austrian among the deserters, a giant named Von Raath. A slow thinker, but he spoke at last. “Vun time I vas sealing in der Pribilofs – vay up in der Bering Sea. I nearly finish up under vun of dose big bull seals. On der rocks a seal vas quicker’n a man. Tanks very moch – I go no more sealing.”

“I won’t ask ye to change your mind,” put in Jack Gove craftily. “If ye’ve still got money – why, stay wi’ Black Sophie and good luck to ye all. Sophie, these gentlemen’s glasses are empty.”

Black Sophie beamed with hospitality. She called on the Alabama crowd for a song, and Von Raath lumbered across

to the orchestra. He chose a song that had come from America during the Civil War, with a tune the world was hearing at that period.

*Hans Breitmann gife a barty,
Dey had biano-blaying,
I felled in lofe mit a Merican
frau
Her name vas Madilda Yane.
She hat haar as prawn as a
pretzel,
Her eyes were himmel-plue,
And when dey looket into mine
Dey shplit mine heart in dwo.*

The party went on, in the song and in Black Sophie’s saloon. And the story of the sentimental German-American reached its climax.

*Hans Breitmann gife a barty –
Vhere is dot barty now?
Vhere is de lofely golden cloud*

*Dot float on de mountain's
prow?
Vhere is de himmelstralende
stern –
De shtar of de shpirit's light?
All goned afay mit de lager
beer –
Afay in de ewigkei!*

Black Sophie applauded and turned to the hesitating men. “Yuh gwine to the islands with my ole fren’ Jack,” she told them. “Plenty money for sailormen on those islands. Easy money! And then yuh come back here and we have another sing-song and dance, and plenty more fine girls.”

Most of them were in the mood to agree, and Black Sophie clinched it for those who were willing. “I cash your advance notes, boys. Take boots, oilskins, bacey, brandy – what you want. I trust Alabama men.” The bag

of silver was down on the table, and Jack Gove had his island crew.

They drank success to the sealing venture, they drank to the departed Alabama, they drank to open-hearted Black Sophie. They shook hands with Von Raath and those who were staying behind. And with many a drunken delay they lurched out into Bree Street at last and down to the waterfront, singing as they went.

*Ho, Sally Brown's a bright
mulatto, Way, hay, roll and
go!
Ho, she drinks rum and chews
tobacco,
Spend my money on Sally
Brown.*

They slept off the drink in the Rover's hold, curled round barrels of salt pork, in company with sundry beach-

combers and other dockside scourings
who had signed on for the islands. At
first light the Rover broke out her
anchor and spread her wings. But in
that grim hour there was no singing,
only the faint echo of a song.

*Hans Breitmann gife a barty –
Where is dot barty now?*

Brandy, bad women and song – all
those have sent men to the islands. But
often there has been something more,
an elusive influence that survives and
is as strong today as it was in Black
Sophie's time. It is so hard to define
that you will have to ship for the
islands yourselves before you can
hope to understand.

Way, hay, roll and go!

Chapter 2

LANDFALL AT PANTHER HEAD

SAILING DAY, a hot March day more than eighty years after Black Sophie's sing-song, and I am bound for the islands. Not for the first time; but like the sailormen of old, like the ragged Cape coloured labourers of today, I can hear the call of the waterless isles. I shall not be satisfied until I have gazed upon the wonder of the birds in their millions again, and the aching lunar landscape of the Namib Desert coast.

The quay is alive with struggling men and screaming women. True to the roistering island tradition, the men have fortified themselves against departure; yet they are obviously glad to be going. Down the steep gangway they stagger, some with blankets and sacks and wooden boxes, others with

nothing but the bright, thin costumes they wore at their New Year carnival.

It takes all the strength of the police to handle this crowd. These men are the sweepings of the waterfront, gaolbirds and drunkards; yet all of them anxious for once to earn their keep and regular honest pay. Each man is searched hastily for drink and dagga as he sets foot on the gangway. Some of the bottles are detected and smashed on the wooden fender between ship and quay – though not without angry protests.

Among the labourers are a few old men who have hardly missed a guano season throughout this century. Some carry watermelons, loaves of bread, boiled crawfish, guitars. Certain individuals, skilled boatmen and experienced cargo trimmers, have come straight from gaol, cropped and

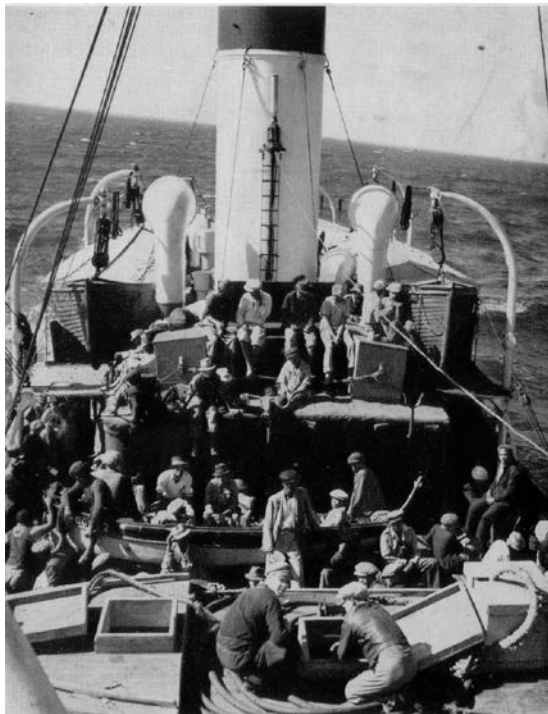
beaming with pleasure, their fines paid by the officials. These are the poorest of the poor. They could not be happier if they were bound for the Islands of the Blest.

Besides those who have “signed on” in the regular way, dozens of others are waiting for the chance to fill last-minute gaps in the ranks. Desperately eager to sail, they jump for the deck and often succeed in mingling unobserved with the horde. Talk about stowaways – the ship must be full of them. More and more “pierhead jumps” arrive, and one falls over the quay on to the fender, among the shattered bottles, and is rescued and carried off to hospital. No use searching the ship. The police dare not search this ship on sailing day. From the ‘tween-decks for’ard arises the

odour of dagga. Any officer who went down there would be knifed.

I tell you, we have a load of cut-throats and scoundrels in this packet. Tomorrow, and on the islands, they will behave fairly well. Today they are sprawling drunkenly over the hatches, ready to sing or snarl. They are quarrelling over the brandy they have smuggled on board, stealing the pitiful possessions of new hands, swindling each other at cards, shouting coarse farewells to friends on shore. Nearly two hundred of them, and if they all went to the rail at once the little steamer would heel at her berth.

Only the privileged boatmen and trimmers have shelter. All the rest will use hatches, boats, the fo’c’s’le head and engine-room superstructure as bunks. They will sleep and eat in the fresh air throughout the voyage. For



Nearly two hundred of them, and if they all
went to the rail at once the little steamer
would heel

men who have been sleeping in Roeland Street gaol, or at best on the mountainside, this is luxury.

Our ship is the Union Government steamer Gamtoos, which will be remembered as the South African salvage vessel which cleared Tobruk, Benghazi, Tripoli, Marseilles and other Mediterranean harbours during the war. Winston Churchill, on a visit of inspection, once trod these steel decks which our riff-raff are now defiling. She looks like a tough, miniature tanker with her yellow and black funnel aft and her high bridge. Miniature is the word, for she is a ship of eight hundred tons, less than two hundred feet long, and without a deck anywhere where I can exercise my legs. Yet she sailed south into the "roaring forties" a few years ago, carrying stores for the official South

African expedition which annexed Marion Island. They tell me she is a good sea-boat and I can believe it. Anyway, I have been to sea in smaller craft than this, and liked it.

Now the clamour on the wharf is growing to a roar as the gangway is unlashed. The last of the “pierhead jumps” lands among the seething humanity on deck and is immediately lost to sight, hidden by obliging friends. Just after the noon gun has sounded the Gamtoos begins to wrench herself away from the wall. The guitar players feel that this is their moment, and the song that has survived for nearly ninety years is heard again.

*Daar kom die Alabama
Die Alabama oor die see
Kerlinkie swaai, lekker draai
Daar onder om die draai.*

As the Gamtoos swings out, unaided by tugs, her bow nuzzles against the quay. This brings our merry rascals very close to the shore crowd. Men leaning far over the rail seize panic-stricken girls and pretend to be dragging them on board – presumably to a fate worse than death. One labourer sees his wife in the crowd; she is in the arms of a humorist who taunts the departing husband. The husband leaps the rail, deals mercilessly with the humorist, regains the ship safely and shouts to his wife: “Now you stay at home tonight!”

Then the Gamtoos is away, heading for the dock entrance. At the end of the quay we have left is a solitary, gesticulating figure – a tall, coloured harridan with wild hair, determined to see the last of us. Her words are lost in the blast of the siren, and perhaps it is

just as well. She is a figure from Cape Town's disreputable past – a reincarnation of Black Sophie waving a farewell to hard-bitten men going down to the sea and the islands.

Off the breakwater the second mate streams the log, just as I have done on board small yachts sailing along the same course northwards out of Table Bay.

I am happy to be going to sea again. As always, the trivial cares of the land fall away and I wonder why I ever allowed them to menace me. Last time I pulled out it was on board a coaster larger than the Gamtoos. I was very tired that time, but in one day I cast off the burdens of years. Now I have the same light feeling. The beat of the engines is a tonic. In fact, that steady movement and the clean sea air,

shipboard routine and new horizons make up a prescription that will cure many city ills, perhaps most of them, as wise old doctors know.

All my life I have been taking this simple prescription, and I need no doctor to tell me how good it is. This medicine cured me when I endured a week in a Cape trawler on the Agulhas bank, fish for breakfast and sometimes fish and chips at midnight when the last of the catch had been gutted and stowed in ice. I took it again with the Norwegian whaler men. They were sick because they had been drinking heavily on shore; and they could not understand why I was not sick. Well, the secret is out. It is just the healing sea. Whether you gaze upon it from the wide decks of an outgoing mail boat or from such odd little craft as I have chosen in my time, the result will

be the same. You cast your ailments away.

For the island labourers this is a sanatorium and a land of plenty. Thin-ribbed and liverish now, addled with canteen liquor and shivering in the sea-breeze, they will return plump and warmly-clad. Today they have the headaches they deserve. But already the polony and coffee and biscuits are going round. Most of them eat out of tins. Hardly a man has had the forethought or the means to bring a knife, fork, mug or plate with him. They are among the most improvident people on the face of the globe. Happy-go-lucky stupid, island labourers, but with sense enough to sign for the islands every year when the time comes round.

There may be a crime wave when they return. Six months hard labour

between seasons is fair enough, and not a bad way of passing the slack period. But the island man who is taken by the police shortly before the Gamtoos sails has a real grievance. The cunning ones seldom commit a crime which will land them in gaol early in the year. It calls for nice judgment, of course, but it is worth the effort.

In the evening the seamen rig awnings for the deck passengers. Men with blankets share with blanket less neighbours. I watch a man with flimsy carnival trousers preparing for a night on deck by pulling off his jacket and wrapping it round his head. A few hours ago the whole ship was festooned with men. Now the decks are quiet. They have crept into sheltered corners, merged into the wood and steel of the ship. And the ship

drives on, north past Dassen, north past the light on Columbine, north to the barren isles.

Within these few hours I have met all the officers. Captain Wally Finlayson has made me welcome in the wheelhouse, and I can pace the bridge planks without further invitation. This is a privilege I value. I like watching professional seamen at work, for I know enough of their problems to recognize their skill and the instinct that surpasses mere skill. Captain Finlayson has a distinction rare nowadays, a “square-rigged” master mariner’s certificate. You meet few sail-trained seamen halfway through the twentieth century, but he is one of that vanishing company.

*Below those markless pathways
where commerce shapes the
trail,*

*Unsung, unrung, forgotten
sleeps the Sailor of the Sail.*

Well, here is one who is alive and alert. He is also the most gentle of all the shipmasters I have met. No bellowing or bluster. A quiet, extremely capable man who watches every detail of the day’s work. If he notices an unseamanlike blunder he smiles and explains how things should be done at sea. Never before have I seen such kindliness and restraint. It may have been the Conway, or the Mersey, or the years in Western Ocean liners, or the destroyer he commanded during the First World War, or some later experience. Come what may, Captain Finlayson will know how to remain unruffled.

Captain Finlayson is a South African by birth. So is Mr. Barend Burger, the torpedo-bearded mate, an Afrikaner

who was brought up on a Wellington farm close to "Sailor" Malan of Royal Air Force fame. They swam in the same dam and dried their apricots in the sun and never thought they would go to sea. One day young Burger saw a newspaper with a page of pictures showing life in the South African training-ship General Botha. Those pictures took him round the world in Blue Funnel ships. He has served on the China coast, and he knows the bird islands of Peru. In the fullness of time I expect Mr. Burger will return to the land, and certainly he will have strange tales to tell of the world beyond the peaceful orchards of Wellington.

Chief engineer in this ship, Mr. Charles Mussared, is an artist. His cabin, close to the stern and measuring about eight feet by six is crowded with

paintings and text-books on art cheek-by-jowl with fishing tackle and engineering manuals. In previous ships, Mr. Mussared tells me, he carried a bicycle so that in many ports he could pedal into the countryside and paint. On this run there are no pleasant rural scenes; only the islands and a coast where a cyclist would die of thirst.

Mr. Mussared is also deeply interested in soil erosion and economics. As the Gamtoos furrows the uneroded South Atlantic and lifts to the long sou'-west swell, Mr. Mussared listens to his engines and studies the latest pamphlet from the Veld Trust. Once, in a flight of imagination, he invented an incubator worked by a hurricane lamp. It seems that such articles are designed better on poultry farms, for not one of Mr. Mussared's incubators was sold. I

shall call on Mr. Mussared again, and try to decide whether I prefer the nude alongside the port-hole or the dock scene over the wash-basin. It is not every ship that offers the passenger an art-gallery and an artist with a sense of humour.

The great narrator in the Gamtoos, I soon discover, is Mr. Matthews, second mate, a man nearing sixty who has experienced all the vicissitudes of the sea and has no hesitation in recalling them. Such is his gift of reviving an all-too-vivid past that I can listen to Mr. Matthews for days.

I am on the bridge and Mr. Matthews is on watch, standing on a box so that he can see over the dodger. "Have you ever considered the handicap of being short?" inquires Mr. Matthews. "A tall chap like you now, arms like a mountain gorilla, you wouldn't notice

it. But me ... everything's out of reach. A hundred and twenty ships I've been in during forty years at sea and this is the first time I've had to use both hands and all me strength to pull the whistle-lanyard. Oh, I've a long memory for hardships and I've had plenty. How I hate noise! Boats, whistles, steam and machinery. Calculations, calculations, the treacherous fog closing in round us, captain calling me, whistle going ... enough to drive a man barmy."

Mr. Matthews started his career in a Tyne training-ship where boys were flogged with the cat-o'-nine-tails. "Like a hunted stag, I felt, all the time I was in her," he remarks with feeling. "Penny a week pocket-money and cosmopolitan company – riff-raff, West Indian negroes and sundry half-castes. Captain had seven daughters,

seven lovely wenches, the fairest in the land. And any boy who became infatuated wi' one o' them was spread-eagled and flogged as in Nelson's day. I kept out o' trouble myself and won a Good Conduct medal. Penny a week pocket money, and when we left we got a two-pound-ten suit, a Bible, a sailor's bag and a sailor's farewell. She's on the bottom now, the old training-ship Wellesley – the right place for her. Two boys who'd been flogged set fire to her and I'm told it was like Trafalgar watching the old oak timbers burning.”

After a keen glance at the compass Mr. Matthews resumes his life story. “First voyage we had a cargo of wild animals for Marseilles. Animals at sea – a damned nuisance I call ‘em. Ship rolling forty-five degrees on the scale, cages broke open, and there were

monkeys and gorillas and tigresses roaming the ship. Some of the monkeys we netted, and some we caught with nuts in a bottle – an old trick. They lassoed the tigresses and that left the gorillas.

“Much bigger than me, those gorillas were, and I was at the wheel in the dark thinking about them. I could hear the growling of leopards and the screeching of monkeys as the ship rolled. Then I had a fleeting glimpse in the binnacle, the reflection of a hairy head and the whites of a big creature's eyes. I was sure one of the gorillas had come to get me, and I swung round with a yell. It was a deck-hand with a fur cap, waiting to relieve the wheel.”

Apparently there is not a port, not a coast, not an ocean that Mr. Matthews has not sailed. He has served in the Majestic, one of the world's largest

ships, and commanded a six-hundred-ton steamer running out of Singapore. Four years of his life he spent coasting among the Falkland Islands, loading mutton fat, merino wool and seal oil. He has handled guano before this, too, in the schooner Rainbow, visiting the Indian Ocean islands. He knows the China coast – “those typhoons, they blow you flat”. In the Swatow earthquake boulders rained on his ship, but he got away to sea. He talks of “curry and rice ships” on the coast of India; the West African run when families of spiders came out of the banana cargo and bit the crew; and a captain nicknamed “Mad jack” who drove his officers crazy by taking sights all through the day and night, even in mid-ocean.

“I had to get out and fend for myself you see – family of four,” explains Mr.

Matthews. “It would cost £20,000 to visit all the places I’ve seen. ... I could make you rock with laughter at some of my memories, mister. Would I go to sea if I had my time over again? Yes and no. With pay and conditions like this, yes. But not if I had to go through my life again. No, I’d go chicken-farming.”

At the end of the second day at sea I know not only the officers but the ship. And I have found a sanctuary away from the packed humanity on the decks below.

It is “monkey island”, above the wheel-house, open to the sunlight but protected by canvas. Here is the standard compass, and at intervals an officer comes up the vertical ladder to check the steering compass. For the rest of the time I can lie alone in the

sun imagining I am a millionaire with my own steam-yacht taking me to the islands.

One glance over the edge of this eyrie, however, is enough to dispel that illusion. Crates of vegetables are stowed on the amidships hatch, and a downward glance informs me that the labourers are stealing and munching carrots to pass the time between their ample meals. Some of them have comic papers, and one is pouring over a copy of "Life" and looking extremely puzzled. They line up in relays on the starboard side and return from the galley with enormous portions of bully beef and mealie meal. "This is better than Roeland Street", they must be saying as they devour their rations.

Then I notice Mr. Price, the inspector, handing out brass discs to the men. He is in charge of the labourers, a man of

many duties, the man who takes charge of all the boat work when the anchor goes down off each island, the man who settles all problems on shore and sends the guano sacks and sealskins on board.

Each brass disc has a number, and a labourer who loses his disc loses his identity with it. Names have little meaning in the islands, for our rascals are too fond of changing their names. And as about seven hundred men are engaged every year to work the whole string of islands, these brass discs are the only means of keeping track of them.

The names in the inspector's book are no help at all. If a labourer likes his headman he is liable to adopt the headman's name. Popular, bygone skippers of island ships, and former inspectors, would be gratified to know

that labourers have assumed their names, too, in fond memory of past favours. Only by brass discs and carefully-indexed finger-prints can you be sure of your island men.

Labourers agree to serve on any island for a maximum period of twelve months, if required. Some remain for three years at a stretch, thrifty souls with savings-bank books; but such men are rare. Nearly all the men on deck will be back in Cape Town in four months' time. They earn about £5 a month, and a few days after their riotous return they will have spent the last penny.

They are spending some of their money now, before they have earned it. Mr. Price's cabin, opening on to the deck below the wheel-house, is so full of bales and crates that he can hardly climb into his bunk. This is the "slop

chest", an old sea institution. Here the ragged labourers can buy blue jerseys and caps, socks and overalls, towels and letter-pads, playing-cards and guitar-strings – and, above all, tobacco.

Nine out of ten of these men have been to the islands before. I find it difficult to explain their feverish eagerness to spend four months of every year in such isolation, unless you are willing to accept the theory that such men as these know what is good for them. It cannot be the money. It may be the certainty of full stomachs and a healthy life. They are inarticulate, most of them, and only vaguely aware of motives. One man told the inspector in my presence: "I came back from the war and found my wife was going to have a baby – so I signed for the islands."

True enough, I suppose, and yet the statement does not satisfy me. And here is another thing. The lonely isles are the ones where these men wish to go. Soon I will show you the chart so that you can visualize all the islands. The season is longer on the lonely isles. "More days, more dollars," as seamen say. And more free meals.

I think it is hunger or the fear of hunger that drives many of them. I have been told that men join the French Foreign Legion simply because they are hungry. For more than a century these guano isles have been manned by hungry men, and most of the time the islands have fed them sufficiently well. Some men have had other personal reasons; and that the islands provide something more than food I cannot deny. I wish I could be more definite about that something

more. Perhaps it will emerge. At the moment I can only say that men are willing to be marooned for the sake of the rations, and because the same friends are marooned with them year after year.

I could draw a chart of the islands from memory. Yet I find myself in the wheel-house staring at the chart on which the course of the Gamtoos is marked by a thin pencil-line forty-five miles offshore. Only the chart reveals all the islands and islets and rocks from which the Union Government draws wealth in the shape of the "white gold" of guano and more luxurious bales of sleek seal pelts.

Some of the islands lie close to civilization. There is a small group off Port Elizabeth, one seal rock in the harbour of Mossel Bay, a guano island

and a seal reef near Danger Point. Within sight of Table Mountain is the penguin stronghold of Dassen Island, and not far beyond that are the Saldanha Bay and Paternoster islands. All these have their tales of shipwreck and sea adventure, and when the voyage in the Gamtoos is over I shall return to them. These isles, with one at Lambert Bay and a sealing rock on the Namaqualand coast, are the old Cape islands that have been known and exploited in one way or another for centuries.

The Gamtoos is heading towards a wilder and far more remote scene – the northern islands with their background of drama and queer history. The northern islands that saw bitter fighting and sudden death in the days of the “guano rush”; violent diplomatic duels between Britain and

Germany; weird incidents and mad escapades; days of breathless excitement and years of boredom; and above all a procession of odd, adventurous characters living and often dying in extreme isolation; sometimes dying in their bunks, but more often with their boots on.

On the chart you can follow the coast which is almost as lonely, sometimes more lonely than, the islands. As far as the Orange River the coast has its sprinkling of farms and fishing stations, and police posts wherever diamonds are washed up by the sea. But after the diamond settlements at the Orange River mouth comes the desert, the long Namib Desert coast that stretches north, always north, unbroken by any real oasis for eight hundred miles.

It is not without landmarks and harbours, this aching desert coast, but the landmarks are grey and barren and the harbours cheerless. Strike inland for eighty miles, and if you survive the menacing dunes and the sandstorms you will come at last to a grand country, though never a green country. Down on the coast and on the islands you understand why old-time sailormen called this the "Coast of Dead Ned". And there was not just one poor Dead Ned in those dunes. There were many.

The 1st of March 1949 was the day of departure. On March 4 I am on "monkey island" soon after daybreak, with the Gamtoos heading inshore and Captain Finlayson looking out for Panther Head. Do you remember the Panther? Back in July 1911 the German gunboat Panther was the

cause of an international incident. Germany and France both had their eyes on Morocco. The Panther put into Agadir and would have seized the port if Britain had not intervened. For some time after that the Panther patrolled the coast of South-West Africa and helped to survey uncharted stretches. That is why her name is on the chart the Gamtoos is using.

Panther Head! That is where you sight the first of the northern islands, and here is the landfall made by island schooners and island steamers for more than a hundred years. It is just a grey sandy promontory with Chameis Bay in its northern arm and Panther Reef in the bay; and at this hour the sun is at the angle which makes every feature of the coastline stand out sharply. I can see three flat-topped mountains behind Panther Head. Just

to the south of the headland is South Island, worthless from the guano point of view.

Panther Head is one of the places on this coast which attracts diamond raiders. I shall have more to say about those desperate expeditions later. Let me warn you in the meantime that there is a forlorn police station staffed by two native constables hidden away a mile or two from Panther Head. Last time I was up here I travelled overland, with a special permit, and I saw how the rich spots on this coast of diamonds are patrolled.

I never sight Panther Head without thinking of the historic little gunboat, white-painted, with two yellow funnels and a scroll on her old-fashioned bow. Built in 1901 for the Kaiser's navy, she was broken up thirty years later. She was a fast, twin-

screw ship of a thousand tons with a couple of four-inch guns. She, too, will reappear in the island story.

Not far north of Panther Head is Sinclair's Island, inhabited by seals and penguins and human beings and, perhaps, by a one-eyed ghost with a white top-hat. You have your bearings now? You remember Captain Sinclair and the drawing on the white-washed wall? Black Sophie Rock is before you at last, crawling with seals. And beyond it, with a guano-whitened top, is Plumpudding Island.

All the way now the Gamtoos will be calling at islands and sighting the rocks where the seals haul up to breed. Pomana, Albatross Rock, Possession, Long Island, Halifax, Penguin and Seal, Dumfudgeon, the Marshall Rocks, Ichaboe, Mercury and finally Hallata's Bird Island. You would

never imagine the yarns that are told
by the men who have lived on those
islands. They are true yarns.

Chapter 3

NATURALIST IN EXILE

SINCLAIR'S ISLAND has four men on it, and the Gamtoos is sounding her way in towards the uncertain anchorage to pick them up. They have been there for eighteen months; long enough, I should say, to spend on a rock only eight hundred yards long and about two hundred yards broad. Someone told me there was a tree on Sinclair's Island, but he was mistaken. It is just a rock.

"Headman" on Sinclair's Island is Mr. Robert Rand, the department's official naturalist. He is a cheerful scientist of twenty-nine, a man who lives for his work. The other exiles are Bob Rand's coloured cook and boatmen.

The island has a high, rocky ridge in the centre and a beach of shingle. On

the landward side is the house and a wooden shack used by Rand as a laboratory; all enclosed by a wall to keep the seals out of the buildings and the penguin area. Everywhere else the seals are sunning themselves, coughing and barking, raising their whiskers and gazing lazily at the ship. Off the southern end is a tiny islet known as Devil's Island.

One peculiar sight at Sinclair's Island is the sand bridge stretching from the island to the mainland. Today it is covered by six feet of water. Once in every two or three years, perhaps, the seas sweeping round the northern and southern ends of the island build up the sand so that the bridge appears at last above the surface. It may remain like that for weeks. On such occasions the guardians of the island can walk for five hundred yards dry-shod to the

shore. But they can go no further. All this coast is “Sperrgebiet”, forbidden diamond desert. The penalty for taking a stroll inland is £500, or a year’s imprisonment. Step beyond high-water mark, and the police may emerge from their hiding place. Perhaps it is just as well that changing weather soon tears the bridge away.

It was different in the old days, before the diamond discovery. One of the old hands told me about life on Sinclair’s Island in the nineties of last century.

“Captain of the schooner put us over the side at five o’clock in the afternoon – nine men of seven different nationalities in a twenty-eight foot boat,” he recalled. “There was not even a hut on Sinclair’s Island at that time, so we took an old mainsail and a few broken oars to make a tent. We towed nine casks of fresh water, each

of seventy-five gallons, to the beach, and the schooner cleared off without even waiting to see whether we got on shore safely. Oh, there was no pampering of sailormen in those days.”

My friend the old hand said that his gang spent nearly six months on the island without relief. “I was young and strong and did not care,” he went on. “When the sand bridge came up, we rolled our water-barrels to the mainland and filled them at a spring we discovered on top of a flat hill. At other times we rowed on shore and set traps for jackals, using penguins as bait. It was a Robinson Crusoe life, and all the islands were the same. Two bottles of lime juice had to last us for six months, and a couple of bags of fresh potatoes were all we got for the season. That was before the

Government took over the islands. The brothers de Pass had the lease, Cockney Jews, and we reckoned they treated us well. We got three-pound-ten a month, and the usual sailing-ship rations. I am not a college man, and the pay seemed fair enough – that and the sealing money, of course. It was a good life on Sinclair's. ... I had an old rifle, and I used to go on shore after gemsbok, springbok and wild ostrich. Sometimes we were hungry, sometimes we filled our stomachs with fresh meat."

In those days the Hottentots would come down to the coast with cattle, ostrich feathers and springbok horns. Island headmen were allowed to pay about three pounds for an ox; and the Hottentots were glad to take coffee and tobacco in exchange for other goods.

The old hand remembered Captain Benjamin Sinclair, the one-eyed captain with the white top-hat. As a young man in 1841 Sinclair had taken part in sealing on the islands, before the rush to Ichaboe, and he had spent many years on the coast as agent for the de Pass brothers. Sinclair was the man who bartered with the Hottentot chiefs and gained mineral rights for the de Pass firm. They thought a lot about copper in those days, and the Sinclair Mine in the north-eastern corner of the Luderitz district was one of Captain Sinclair's enterprises. Then there was the Pomona Mine, silver and copper pyrites, in the heart of fabulously rich diamond gravels.

Sinclair never thought about diamonds. He loaded his wagons with guns and gunpowder, bought farms from the Hottentots, and carried on a

private war against Bushman raiders. Sometimes he lived in a hut on the coast; often he was away for months in the wild no-man's-land of the unmapped interior; and in between he commanded brigs and schooners sailing along these uncharted shores. An adventurer in the grand manner was Captain Sinclair, and just the man to seize an island and give it his own name. He must have been well over eighty when he died at the end of last century, and he had spent most of his life beyond the law and truly a law unto himself.

Sinclair also took possession of Plumpudding Island, a few miles to the north of Sinclair's Island. It looks like a plum pudding in the distance, but the old hand told me a grim, unappetising yarn about that island. Two men were left there by Sinclair to

guard the birds between seasons – a Frenchman and a Norwegian named Aleck. They had no boat, and when the Frenchman became ill there was not the faintest hope of fetching help. The Frenchman died. Aleck could not face the prospect of remaining alone on the island with a corpse, so he built a raft. He loaded it with food and water and paddled towards the beach. The strong northward current took the raft and swept it along outside the breakers. For more than seventy miles Aleck clung to his raft, until he was tossed on shore in a little bay near Pomona. It is still known to the island people as Aleck's Bay.

One day in 1893 my friend the old hand and Gus Hagstrom, a Swede, had gone on shore for water and were rolling a sixteen gallon barrel back to the beach. They sat down on a patch of

gravel for a rest and a smoke. Hagstrom played idly with pebbles of different shapes and colours, and showed some of them to my friend. It did not occur to either of these simple sailormen that they were sitting on a patch of diamondiferous gravel. They never dreamt that half a century later there would be streets of houses at the mouth of the Orange River and that American machinery worth a million pounds would be ploughing into the sand and sifting out the diamonds. Hagstrom threw away his pebbles, threw away a fortune. Happily they went back to their three-pound-ten a month jobs on Sinclair's Island, rolling the water barrel over the narrow bridge of sand.

Food and water are often more precious than diamonds on the islands. The old-timer told me what happened

at the end of nearly six months when the schooner failed to arrive. They could not live indefinitely on penguin eggs; the buck had moved away from the coast; it had become hard to shoot even a flamingo, and the ammunition was running out. So he decided to walk to Luderitz, the nearest settlement, one hundred miles away to the north. He set out with a Hottentot labourer as guide, and they carried bottles of water and lime-juice.

At low tide they trudged along the beaches, past weird caves, past the huge arch rock called Bogenfels. At high tide they struck inland and marched on desperately over ground that was to yield millions in diamonds. When they reached the bay opposite Possession Island they lit a smoke fire; but there was no response, and they dared not linger. Four days after

leaving Sinclair's Island they staggered into Luderitz and found the schooner at anchor in the bay. She had been delayed by heavy weather. Other men on other islands had been waiting for supplies. Sinclair's Island happened' to be the last on the list.

"I hear they get oranges on the islands now," remarked the old hand with deep contempt. "A steamer runs round like clockwork and takes them oranges. It makes me laugh. Oranges for a bunch of island labourers!" He revelled in his memories of past hardships. They were tough, the old island crowd, the men who drank at Black Sophie's boarding-house, and those who came after them.

But now the flat boom is going over the side, a solid boat shaped like a whaler, with more beam. I can see Bob Rand, wearing his old khaki

battledress, on the jetty. His long spell of isolation is over, and by this time he must know more about seals and penguins than any other man in Southern Africa.

"Lonely? No, I don't think I was even bored," Bob Rand told me. "I had a radio receiver, but that is not the reason. The only serious mistake I made was in not taking enough books. That's one of the things you learn on the islands. I put that right later. I wrote to naturalists all over the world, and got scientific literature, bags of it. And my work kept me busy from dawn to dusk."

Rand had one large room, divided into bedroom and study. There was no fireplace, and it was never cold enough for a fire. The notorious West Coast fogs never lasted long enough to

depress him; they are felt more severely on the islands further north. He lived on the ordinary headman's rations, and found them ample. The cook was a good man, and that made a difference. Once a month, or sometimes once every two months, the motor cutter from Luderitz brought him fresh meat and vegetables – and sometimes a sack of oranges. At other times there was seal meat, which is palatable enough when minced and served as fritters. It was rich, he said, an acquired taste.

It was the same with penguin eggs. During the first nine months he ate four eggs. Then a long period without fresh food drove him on to penguin eggs and he came to like them and had them cooked regularly. He seldom used a fishing line or crawfish net. That would have meant taking the boat

out and it was a large boat for four men to haul out of the water.

Nevertheless he had the boat out on several occasions to explore the coast north and south of Sinclair's Island. He and his men rowed over to Plum-pudding and further on to a cape marked on the chart as False Plum-pudding. Here he made a minor geographical discovery. False Plum-pudding is not a cape, but an island close to the shore. To the south he examined Sparrowhawk Island and other rocks, and Baker's Bay. Ten miles in each direction was the limit, for there was always the danger of fog coming down suddenly and making it difficult to regain Sinclair's Island.

Only once during the whole eighteen months he spent on the island did Rand and his men see human beings

on the mainland. They were members of the police patrol.

Rand's main task was the study of seals. For centuries this island has been one of the favourite resorts of the seal hunters on the coast; they could get nearly a thousand skins there on a lucky day. No sealing was done while Rand was there. The island became a sanctuary where he could work undisturbed. He had to shoot a few of the larger seals from time to time; he weighed them, examined the stomach contents, measured the skulls. But there was no slaughter.

Most of the time Rand was catching, weighing and branding the seal pups. If he caught a branded pup a month later he would weigh it again and note the rate of growth. It was the first time scientific work of this kind had been

done on the islands; he had nothing to work on but his own results.

Rand often disguised himself as a seal to watch the herds at close quarters. He crawled up in his sealskin covering, just as the Bushmen stalk their game dressed as ostriches. The trick was so successful that large bull seals began to take an interest in him, and slid lazily over the rocks in his direction. At that point Rand had to drop his skin and retreat.

So his days and months were filled with interest. He watched the love-making of the birds and the seals, all the dramas of the mating seasons; he observed the penguin and the gannet chicks emerging from the eggs, growing up, taking to the sea and the air. Every morning at daybreak he was at his observation post while the sun came over the mainland wilderness as

it had done for countless ages, when dinosaurs roamed these beaches and penguins were unknown in these seas. Every day there was the same old surf beating against the steep sand and black rocks with the same old crashing song. It was like this before the coast was charted. Away from his hut, Rand was over the edge of civilization, a naturalist in an entirely natural world. I can see how he stuck it out and found the life of a hermit fascinating. This was better than university text-books and laboratories. Here, in a small but definite way, he was gaining knowledge at first hand and adding to human knowledge.

“I was never ill,” said Rand. “The only thought of illness that ever occurred to me was the possibility of an appendix. There would have been no way out of

that emergency – and it never happened.”

Later I was to hear startling tales of emergencies on the islands; great tales of ingenuity rewarded; sad tales of tragedies far from medical aid. A man with a worrying temperament would have fared badly in the isolation Rand experienced on Sinclair’s Island.

Rand built his own wooden laboratory on the island, and very soon he discovered that the penguins were stealing his five-inch nails. A few days later they stole his building plans, and he had to search scores of burrows before he recovered the documents. When the laboratory was ready he learnt to keep the door closed. The penguins got some of his small instruments before he took that precaution. But that is an old tale on the islands. Men have accused each other of

thieving and come to blows; and all the time the penguins were to blame.

Sinclair's Island is so low that it has been swept by heavy seas. This occurs only at long intervals of years; but it is a point for builders to bear in mind. It was in 1943 that a huge sea broke on the western side of the island with such force that it reached the summit of the rocky ridges and poured over. Fortunately the men were away at work. A boulder, dislodged by the sea, hurtled down and broke through the roof of the house. So it is not easy to sleep comfortably on Sinclair's Island when the winter gales are raging.

One menace of the old days has been removed. Every island has large concrete water-tanks, with a reserve supply. Rand allowed himself one bath a week – from a bucket. He has never smoked, and he is a teetotaller; but he

took a few bottles of beer and sherry with him, and delighted his men by presenting them with these drinks at Christmas.

In the island service Bob Rand is known as “Professor Joad”. He is an extremely modest scientist, fully conscious of the huge gaps in scientific knowledge of sea-birds and seals. It will take many years of patient study and research before even the elementary questions can be answered with scientific accuracy. Bob Rand appears to have dedicated his life to that enormous task.

Tonight there will be no Bob Rand to creep out and net the shy duikers, the cormorants that can only be approached on their nests or in the darkness. He has been “banding” these birds, and the few malgas on Sinclair's Island, in

the hope that some of them may be caught elsewhere later. Only in this way can the range or migrations of the guano birds be traced.

The Gamtoos is moving away from Angra Juntas, the bay that holds Sinclair's Island and Black Sophie and Plumpudding. Angra juntas means "the bay of the meeting". First in these seas were the fifteenth-century Portuguese navigators, and Angra juntas is one of their names. The little squadrons of exploring ships would anchor in sheltered places; the captains would meet; plans would be made for further voyaging's or the return to Lisbon. I can picture them at anchor off Angra Juntas. I can almost see them departing after their consultations, the scarlet cross of Portugal emblazoned on their sails.

They were wallowing over these seas four years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic. Diaz came this way after raising his stone cross at Angra dos Ilheos, the Bay of Islets, which later became Angra Pequena (the "Little Bay") and finally Luderitz. He was the discoverer of the guano islands. But I have searched the narratives of this voyage written by John De Barros and other old Portuguese historians in vain for details of the man who named Angra Juntas. It must have been some other adventurer who placed this bay and the islands on the early Portuguese charts.

Great sailors, the Portuguese of that period. Great days they were when the coast I am watching from the Gamtoos was merely a tale that was told – a rumour of land many leagues over the horizon. This was the Sea of Darkness,

they believed in sea monsters, and yet they sailed on boldly over the rim of the known world. What landfalls they made! Cape after cape was sighted or landed upon in the expectation of meeting Prester John. Instead of a Christian Kingdom, glittering with gold and fragrant with spices, they met Bushmen and Hottentots, and scented the harsh odour of guano without realizing its value. They saw seals and sea-birds instead of the rumoured human giants; but still they pushed on southwards, under “*ill carro dell’ostro*”, the unfamiliar Southern Cross.

Their ships were much smaller than the little Gamtoos, bluff-bowed caravels of a hundred tons or even tinier barinels and barcas. But they were the finest sailing-ships afloat, and the pilots had wooden astrolabes and tables of declination for fixing the

latitude. They knew they were on the brink of tremendous discoveries, they risked the winds and the currents, and each landfall gave them deeper satisfaction than any modern explorer can hope to feel. That was an adventure worth having. Many of the names they gave remain on the chart – and among them is Angra Juntas, now fading astern. No wonder Camoens the poet boasted of his fellow-countrymen: “If there had been any more of the world they would have reached it.”

Long after the Portuguese came the Dutch. It was a Dutch ship, the *Grundel*, that made a running survey of this coast in 1670 and touched at Angra Pequena and the bay which later became known as Sandwich Harbour. After a brush with the Hottentots on the beach at Sandwich Harbour (in which the *Grundel*’s

captain was stabbed with an assegai), the Grundel sailed a little further north and then returned thankfully to Table Bay. The captain reported “an extraordinary number of whales and dangerous seas”.

English and French ships were the first to hunt those whales. In fact, the whalers were probably there before the Grundel; for Janson’s atlas of 1657 contained a note about English and French whaling expeditions along this coast. But the Dutch were the only explorers of that period to leave even a vague description of the coast for posterity. Whaler men of all nations were notoriously secretive about their activities.

It is astounding, when you consider it, that century after century went by without one of these explorers ever thinking twice about the guano. The

stench of it must have assailed their nostrils, yet they sailed past; leaving great wealth untouched, always seeking riches in other forms.

There was the Dutch ship Bode, sent by the Dutch East India Company in 1677 to map this coast and bring back reliable trade information. Landing in a small, sandy bay which is difficult to identify, the Bode’s men noticed human foot-prints and then came upon a party of Hottentots. The women were carrying seal bladders and stomachs filled with brackish water. Men and women were dressed in sealskins, and the captain of the Bode reported: “These people eat stinking seals and pounded herbs and similar wretched food. So far as we were able to see and judge, there is nothing to be obtained here which could benefit our lords and masters in the very slightest

degree, and all that there is to be found here is sand and stones.”

In the eighteenth century came the American whalers and sealers. How early in that century the first American arrived it is impossible even to guess; for not a log-book remains to fix the date. They ran all the risks of explorers, those hard silent Americans who ventured into the wide southern oceans in search of profit. And they were the most silent of all the world's seafarers. It was a point of honour with them to give nothing away about the islands and the valuable whaling-grounds they discovered. In silence they returned with their rich cargoes of oil and skins. They were brave and enterprising men, and by their silence they robbed history and geography of many a fascinating page.

It is known that American whaling-ships were at work in the Gulf of Guinea as early as 1763, and from there they went south. Late eighteenth-century records mention “Woolwich” (Walvis) Bay as a harbour used by the Americans; and by that time the sealing schooners had joined them. These men spent months on end on the lonely coasts and islands of the world, and no place was considered too remote if there were whales to be harpooned or seals to be clubbed.

They were the first discoverers of many Southern Ocean islands. They buried their dead under the snow, and left their blubber pots to rust on the beaches; but they made no claims and left no other records of their daring visits. By the second decade of the nineteenth century they were working right up to the Antarctic pack-ice.

Their feats of seamanship and endurance among the icebergs, where the gales blow at a hundred miles an hour, deserved as much praise as modern Polar explorers receive. But those stout-hearted men from the New England ports were not met by reporters on their return; and if they had been, they would still have remained silent. The modern Norwegian whaler men in the Antarctic follow the same rule of profound secrecy about their hunting-grounds.

Fortunately one or two American captains broke this almost monastic vow. The man who first made the world aware of the coast and islands of South-West Africa in any detail was Captain Benjamin Morrell of New York – a controversial figure whose reputation has been cleared only in recent years. Back in 1828 he wrote a

description of the whole coast, from the Cape northwards to Angola, that was so valuable and accurate that fragments of it still appear in the modern British Admiralty sailing directions for mariners.

“Captain Morrell is a great navigator, a successful sealer and merchant, a voluminous and entertaining writer and a romantic liar,” wrote an American critic in 1822. “He is the Yankee Munchausen.” Charles Enderby, head of the famous British whaling and sealing firm of Enderby Brothers; stated in public: “I have heard so much of this Morrell that I do not think fit to enter into any engagement with him.” This reputation which Morrell gained must be borne in mind to appreciate what follows, especially in regard to Morrell’s reports on the guano islands.

Morrell sailed many seas, sometimes taking his wife with him. He first came into prominence as a result of a remarkable Antarctic voyage in 1823 – a voyage which still puzzles geographers. He was sealing at Kerguelen that summer in his schooner *Wasp*, and he decided to sail westwards to the ice-clad South Sandwich Islands. Those were fabulous years for the American sealers in the Southern Ocean. Chinese mandarins were paying £1 apiece for the raw skins; and in one season American and British sealers took a quarter of a million skins on the South Shetlands alone. In the even more remote South Sandwich group Morrell expected a rich haul of sealskins.

According to his log-book and his own account, he made the passage in higher latitudes than any previous navigator

had done. He may well have been the first American to sight the great Antarctic continent. It was an “open season”, but Morrell was so far south that he was often almost surrounded by huge ice-islands. It took him sixty-six days to reach the South Sandwich group, and almost every day the *Wasp* was lashed by hail and covered with snow. Morrell said he would have gone even further south, but he was “destitute of the various nautical and mathematical instruments requisite for such an enterprise”.

When he reached his destination Morrell found no seals, but he did discover new harbours and volcanoes. When he reported his discoveries he was called a liar. Since then many details of his report have been verified. On that cruise and during later voyages Morrell searched for doubtful

islands which had been “sighted” by other shipmasters, and declared that they did not exist – the Auroras and Saxemberg Island – and he was right. These were cloud effects mistaken for land, and they have now been removed from the charts. Morrell was successful, however, in locating Bouvet Island, a mid-ocean peak which is hard to find even with modern sextant and chronometer, and he landed there.

These were no mean achievements, but it was not until this century that South Polar authorities vindicated the much-abused Morrell. Dr. H. R. Mill, author of “The Siege of the South Pole”, believed in Morrell’s voyage. Mr. Edwin Swift Balch of Philadelphia, author of “Antarctica”, supported Morrell’s claim. And that critical writer, Lieut-Commander R. T. Gould,

R.N., summed up: “He may have been a braggart and a boaster, but there is no evidence that he was a deliberate liar or that in his account of his Antarctic voyage he was not doing his best to set down a truthful account of what he did and where he went. He has received far more than his fair share of posthumous defamation.”

Such was the man who, in 1828, came sailing northwards along this same coast which I have been studying on the chart in the wheel-house of the Gamtoos. He was then in command of the schooner Antarctic of 172 tons. On his departure from New York he wrote: “I thus commenced another voyage to distant regions with a fine, new substantial vessel and a strong, healthy crew of twenty-three active men in whose faces the love of enterprise and the hope of bettering

their circumstances had kindled the most animating smiles of cheerfulness.”

Morrell called at the Cape Verde Islands and made Saldanha Bay on September 4, 1828. Six days later he sailed up the west coast, hugging the shore. Rivers seemed to have a special attraction for him, and he anchored off the mouth of the Berg River and sent his boats across the bar on the flood tide to fill his water casks. He advised other mariners to follow the same procedure, and noted: “The water will prove to be of a most excellent quality, and will keep sweet as long as any that was ever taken to sea. The next ebb tide will take the casks down to the ship just by keeping the boat ahead, and the whole process will be rather a pleasant recreation than an arduous duty.”

Further up the coast Morrell tried to enter the Olifants River, but found only two feet of water and heavy breakers on the bar. “If there could be a passage cut through the bar it would be the finest harbour on the west coast of Africa,” he remarked. Three miles north of the river mouth he found a large rock covered with seals. He made a good haul there, and called the place Morrell’s Island, a name which appears on some of my old maps, though nowadays it is known as Elephant Rock.

The next island on which Morrell took seals was Sinclair’s Island, though it was nameless in those days. Morrell referred only to Angra Juntas, where “ships may find tolerable shelter with southerly winds”. He then sailed on the course the Gamtoos is following to Possession Island, largest of the group

in these waters. You will meet Captain Benjamin Morrell again on Possession, puzzling over the great mystery of the island.

Chapter 4

GRAVEYARD OF THE OCEAN

EACH OF these isles has its own character. The very size of Possession Island makes me remember it as a giant among sea-swept rocks. You may not think much of an island two miles long (in a north and south direction), half a mile broad at its centre, and seventy feet high. It is a mere Heligoland or Bermuda outpost; and very far from being a Malta or St. Helena. But I was able to exercise my legs on Possession.

The settlement is more like a village than the desperate little clusters of buildings you find on all the other guano islands. You land at a long and solid jetty, pass the guano store and the sealing store; walk along the white-walled breeding flats where thousands of birds are quarrelling; past

boat-sheds and more thousands of birds to the well-built barracks where the labourers live. Beyond that is the galley – they stick to some of the old sailing-ship terms on the islands – and then there is a huge store-room, the quarters for the young white assistants and finally the headman's residence.

Outside the headman's house are the water-tanks, enough to supply the village for months on end, tanks filled with Cape Town water and every drop brought by the Gamtoos and pumped into the tanks by the little motor-boat Aqua. I should have mentioned her earlier, for she is the key to life on the islands. The Aqua travels on the deck of the Gamtoos, a staunch, twenty foot double-ender; just a large water-tank with an engine-room and tiny cockpit. They handle her with extreme care, for the whole schedule will be upset if the

Aqua's engine breaks down. If the Aqua is bumped and damaged there will be chaos. Aqua's skipper is an extremely cheerful and efficient, fair-haired, muscular young man named Churchill Louwrens. He, too, is indispensable. He has to take his boat between the reefs in all sorts of weather. Wherever we call, Churchill Louwrens has a long day's work, and he enjoys it. I have known much smaller people in far higher positions.

Also outside the headman's house is the only garden on Possession Island, a travesty of a garden, tiny enough to bring a lump to the throat of any true gardener. Not a tree will grow on any of these northern islands. Possession has a few xerophytic bushes, and the fungi on this vegetation are even more interesting (so a botanist tells me, and I am still trying to fathom his mean-

ing). The headman's garden is about four feet square, irrigated from his bathroom, and he is trying to grow about a basketful of vegetables. It is strange to reflect that these islands, where great quantities of rich vegetable fertiliser are gathered, will produce no more than a bowl of tomatoes after stupendous effort.

In front of the barracks on Possession is a space large enough for a parade ground, and the labourers brought up by the Gamtoos are on parade. Of course there is nothing military about this shambling coloured force; but Mr. Price, the inspector, has cleared the ship and now he is calling the roll and settling the destinies of his men.

Mr. Price has to think of a hundred small details, and certain large and important matters. If he lands a body of men on an island before the water-

tanks have been filled, and the Gamtoos has to steam out owing to sudden heavy weather, there will be an intolerable problem for the headman. Fortunately the anchorage off Possession is safe in all weathers. Mr. Price has served his time at sea. The inspectors have always been seafaring men; a landsman could not handle this crowd or carry out the exacting duties.

At the moment Mr. Price is splitting up the labour force according to the needs of the different islands – and trying at the same time to keep everyone happy. The men have fixed ideas on this subject. They have their favourite headmen and their favourite islands. Most of them follow the old principle: “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know.” Year after year they ask to be landed on the island where they spent their previous

season’s exile. Friends hang together. The fact that one island offers better housing than another means nothing to them. On the parade ground the atmosphere is tense until the men know where they are going.

Meanwhile I am studying the house-keeping system of the islands. Possession is stocked as though for a siege. If the rest of the world went bust and starved, the men on Possession would still be eating their ordinary meals many months after the cataclysm. As I watch the checking of the stores I marvel at the abundance.

For the white staff there are tins of bacon and fish, many varieties of meat and vegetables, sacks of barley and beans, flour and meal, and the mealie meal and dried fruit which South Africans enjoy. Huge quantities of curry powder are consumed on the

islands, and with it go sacks of rice, potatoes and onions. The ration allows as much strong coffee as any man can drink, with tea and cocoa for variety and cases of tinned milk. All the sauces are there on the shelves, with bottles of lime-juice (all hands must take a two-ounce tot once a week) and barrels of vinegar. Porridge, custard, jelly, biscuits, cheese, macaroni, tomato paste ... no wonder the headmen are huge men, with families to match.

Most of the headmen keep fowls, some have milk-goats and pigs. Fresh bread is baked in the galley. Most of the time there are the sea-birds' eggs and the fish and crawfish; enough to live on, perhaps, if the store-room was empty. Butter is pickled in a salt solution; when a potato floats the mixture is ready. A case of apples will

keep with care for two months. Once the islands were supplied with tinned spinach, but neither headmen nor labourers liked it. Grapes are an occasional luxury which the headmen buy out of their own pockets. Rabbits imported from Dassen Island are fed on Lucerne and eaten at suitable intervals.

All the necessities of life are free on the islands – houses, fuel and food. Not only the headmen but his wife and family are supplied with practically all their needs. If there are children at boarding-school, the government pays two-thirds of the hostel fees. Paraffin for the stoves, fresh meat more or less regularly from Luderitz; every housekeeping problem is solved. And all the island people eat heartily, from the headman down to the youngest coloured labourer. I heard of one man

who ate fifteen penguin eggs at a sitting. One penguin egg is said to contain as much nourishment as two and a half hens' eggs. Headmen have to supply their own furniture, however, and some of them make their own. In spite of the long, official list of duties, it is an easy life when the four months of the guano collecting season are over. Every year a few labourers volunteer to remain behind to paint the houses, jetties and boats. Most of the time the headman's wife has a free servant.

With his wages and sealing money and free food and quarters, these family men can save £400 a year. Many of them own houses and farms in the Bredasdorp district. That is the district which supplies the Afrikaner headmen who run the islands nowadays. If they save up their leave for two years, as

many do, they can spend seven weeks in the little fishing villages of the Bredasdorp coast. Half fishermen, half farmers, these men take naturally to the boat work and the remoteness of the islands. Talk of hardship and they would laugh at you.

Illness is another matter, though it is child-birth that causes emergencies on the islands. I met two headmen who had been forced by circumstances to deliver their own wives of babies. One of them told me: "There was another woman on the island, but she refused to help – she said that she would be held responsible if anything went wrong. I had relied on a fishing-boat calling in time to take my wife to hospital, and the boat never came. Well, I did the job myself, but that is one experience I hope never to have again. My wife was a midwife before

she married me. She told me what to do.”

As a rule, the simple island medicine chest is sufficient. It is as simple as the steward's box of remedies in an old-time sailing-ship. Antiseptics, Vaseline, black draught, castor oil and chlorodyne, Jamaica ginger, Epsom salts, balsam and camphorated oil, Condy's fluid, embrocation, iodine – the standard list takes you away from the penicillin age. Here are old-fashioned ointments, zinc and mercurial, bandages and boracic lint, and the same cough mixture and diarrhoea mixtures that were curing island ailments last century. When anything occurs outside that range of remedies the headman has to use his wits. I shall hear more of these occasions as I land on the far islands.

Headmen are instructed that they are in charge of the welfare of every human being on their islands, and they are responsible for all government property. They are specially warned against risking the lives of their boatmen in heavy weather. On the arrival of a ship the headman must hoist his flag, and run up the danger signal (a large flag with a smaller one below it) if landing conditions are dangerous. When the Gamtoos is expected and an island is covered with fog, the headman lights a fire on the highest point or sets off flares to aid Captain Finlayson in finding the anchorage.

Many a shipwrecked crew have found hospitality on the guano islands, and nowadays headmen are officially bound to render aid. During the Second World War two lifeboats from

a torpedoed ship made Sinclair's Island. Some of the men were injured, and all hands were thankful because they had reached land. But the headman on Sinclair turned them away. He was short of water, unable to help so many men, and he advised them to sail on to Possession. This they did in safety; but the authorities felt that the Sinclair's Island headman might have done more. So hospitality is now a duty. The headman must provide shelter and food – and see that a responsible person signs for it. Headmen are not allowed to leave their islands for more than twenty-four hours except for the most urgent private reasons. They can make a distress signal by hoisting a large South African flag with a black ball three feet below it. That usually means serious illness – though it may be

some time before anyone sights the signal. They must keep diaries recording the weather, sea conditions, movements of birds, visits of ships and fishing-boats, and the day's work; and once a month a report must be written for the Superintendent of the islands who is in Cape Town.

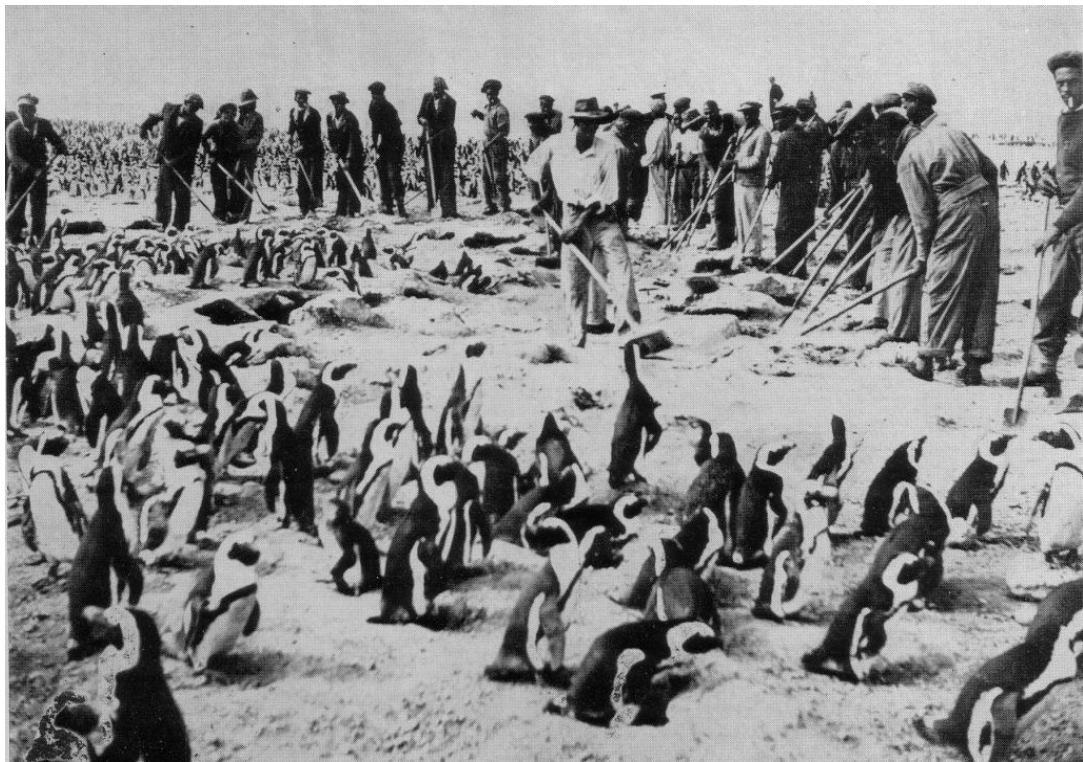
No alcohol is allowed on the islands except in small quantities for the headman's own household. The headman has powers of arrest. He is armed and supplied with handcuffs. If the labourers attempt to smuggle drink or dagga on shore the headman must seize it. I watched the headmen trying on their new, double-breasted khaki uniforms with brass buttons and peaked caps. The cap badge of the service displays two white gannets with a crown above, surrounded by gold leaves.

By far the most important of the headman's duties is the protection of the guano-producing birds. Fishermen catch penguins for use as bait, and some raid the islands at night and kill scores of nesting birds for their crawfish nets. Labourers working on the islands are not above suspicion. They like a change of diet in the shape of young penguins or duikers; but they pay a £5 fine if the headman catches them grilling such midnight feasts among the rocks. At the start of the breeding season the islands must be kept quiet and the breeding flats left undisturbed, or the irritated birds may leave in disgust.

Sunrise to an hour before sundown – that is the period of the day's work on all the islands. Breakfast is served two hours after sunrise, and there is a break of an hour for lunch. The

headman remains with his men all through the day and sees that the guano is scraped up properly. He supervises the sorting of the guano, when stones, feathers and seaweed are removed. And finally he must ensure that the guano is stacked safely. Tons of guano have been lost through careless headmen leaving this “white gold” within reach of the sea.

When ships are being loaded there are no fixed hours of work. If loading is done on Sunday, however, the men take their holiday when the ship has departed. It sounds like a busy life; but as I have said it becomes easy enough when the Gamtoos has made the last trip of the season and taken the labourers away. The men remaining on the islands are supposed to gather any remaining guano between seasons;



The headman remains with his men all through the day and sees that the guano is scraped up properly

in fact, the islands are scraped thoroughly and very little is left.

Labourers who refuse to work are isolated and put on spare diet without tea or coffee. Every day the headman visits the galley, inspects pots, pans and cooking and notes complaints. Seldom nowadays is there trouble over the messing. With one pound of fresh meat a day (or three-quarters of a pound of canned meat), and all the other items on the ration scale, the coloured labourers find the island menus more satisfying than any they have known on the mainland.

Every headman spends a good many hours in his store-room, checking the cargoes landed, keeping ration books, examining the sacks of biscuit and looking out for worms. Guano sacks need attention to prevent rotting. The old sailing-ship tradition of extreme

economy survives on the islands. Like men committed to a voyage, lasting many months, the headmen preserve every scrap and fragment that may come in useful. Not an empty box or bottle is thrown away. Every piece of paper, metal or wood is hoarded. Rusty nails are straightened and polished. Between seasons, this is the Robinson Crusoe life. Even the meat-bones are collected and shipped away for sale in Cape Town. Drums, tins, and barrels go back to headquarters when empty. Flotsam washing up on the islands becomes State property and must be handed over by the headman. The old shellbacks of last century would not have liked that rule. They looted wrecked ships in those days, and afterwards, as I shall tell.

You do not have to go far on Possession to find wrecks and relics of

wrecks. Last century the full-rigged ship Auckland was lost on the jagged west coast. She went down with all hands, and some of the bodies were found and buried in the island graveyard. Among them were the master and his wife. There is an island legend that the woman was half-eaten by sharks, and that her legless ghost still haunts the western shore. The Auckland also carried two large black boarhounds, so that the ghost is accompanied by spectral dogs. Long ago a bold coloured labourer threw a stone at the dogs. Then his neck began to swell, and nothing in the medicine chest would cure him. Only when he was taken away from Possession did he recover.

Sudden death is indeed the theme of many true tales of the islands and the seas that wash the islands. One day in

1905 the Possession headman found two black-painted ship's lifeboats in one of the bays. Strewn along the beach were oars and boathooks, hatches and portions of a ship's bridge. On the same day a labourer sighted another lifeboat drifting past the island, driven by a strong south wind. There were two men in this boat, making wild signals; but they drifted on out of sight. A fortnight later the Cape Town tug Sir Charles Elliott called at Possession. She was searching the coast for the little coasting-steamer Dee, and finally she discovered a board with the name Dee on it. Captain Chaddock and his crew of eleven were never found. The labourer on Possession had seen the last of them.

I saw a blue-print, in the store-room, of the large steamer British Prince. It

had been hanging there for more than thirty years as a reminder of the time when the population of Possession rose overnight from one family to more than four hundred people, mainly women.

It was in 1915, just after the Germans in South-West Africa had surrendered, that the British Prince left Cape Town for Luderitz with this large company of hospital nurses and officers' wives. She struck a reef off Possession in calm weather; all reached the island safely, though the ship became a total loss. Fortunately the castaways brought food and blankets with them. I heard the story of that queer situation long afterwards from a distinguished South African military officer.

"There was no room in the island huts for all those people – we had to camp on the beach," the officer recalled. "As

evening came on the women became peevish at the prospect of a night in the open. I was in charge of one lot, and the captain of the ship was looking after another crowd. I organized my women, they collected driftwood for a huge fire and we made coffee and a hot meal. That put them in a better humour.

"After supper the captain came over to my camp-fire. 'What do you think – they're trying to set up social distinctions and I can't get any work done,' declared the enraged captain. 'Twice, let me tell you, twice I nearly told them to go to the devil.' "

Help came from Luderitz, and the largest population Possession had ever known was removed – still quarrelling. No doubt the people in the Possession graveyard once told much stranger tales. It is a graveyard of the

ocean, marked out with crosses shaped from ships' timber, piled with sea-worn stones, and alive with mournful penguins. I never saw a cemetery with the inevitably tragic atmosphere more sharply defined. One or two of the crosses had been bleached white by the suns and winds of a hundred years; a long time anywhere, painfully long on lonely Possession. "W. Jones, Brig Martha. Aged 23. Ninth of October 1845." I could still read the inscription thanks to the headmen who had preserved that wooden cross for more than a century. I suppose it makes no difference where a man is buried; but W. Jones of the Brig Martha certainly found a lonely grave.

"George Cay, Seaman, Brig Jane, 1852. ... John Bush, born 1826, died 1860. ... Captain Randall of barque Orkney, aged 39, St. Magnus, 1862. ...

Jan Busch of Holland, 1906. ... Charles Livenstein, Finland, 1906. ... Captain A. Hansen, native of Sweden, died aboard schooner Sea Bird, February 9, 19--"

Strange how the minds of dying men go back, in their lust hours, to their homelands. I have put them down, all that I could read, for the weather is slowly obliterating that graveyard on Possession, and one day this may be the only record. Why preserve those long-forgotten names? They are part of the island story, part of the isles where death has taken heavy toll.

As I walk southwards away from the settlement, over the long humps of Possession, I encounter a mystery of the island that has never been solved. I said you would meet Captain Benjamin Morrell again on Possession, and

here I am crossing his tracks and standing bewildered as he was when he made one of his fantastic discoveries.

“On the surface of this island I saw the effects of a pestilence or plague which had visited the amphibious inhabitants of the ocean with as much malignancy as the Asiatic cholera has the bipeds of the land,” wrote Morrell in his most irritating style. “The whole island was literally covered with the carcasses of fur-seal, with their skins still on them. They appeared to have been dead about five years, and it was evident that they had all met their fate about the same period. I should judge, from the immense multitude of bones and carcasses, that not less than half a million had perished here at once, and that they had all fallen victims to some mysterious disease or plague.”

Morrell was here in 1828 and I am following his tracks more than a hundred and twenty years later – and still the surface of Possession is covered with the seal fur that Morrell saw. I know it is the same fur because the island has been inhabited almost ever since Morrell’s visit and the pestilence has never returned. Wherever you go on the higher parts of the island, there is the fur, mixed with seal teeth and bones; the fur crumbling almost to dust, though fragments of furry skin are still to be found. Fur in the graveyard, fur in the penguin burrows, fur along the path made by the headman for his bicycle.

What happened to those half-a-million seals? I do not think Morrell exaggerated the number, for the fur-covered area is large enough to support his estimate. Bob Rand could

not help me, and he knows the seals of these islands as few other men do.

Morrel found more dead seals a few days later on another island in Angra Pequena harbour. That morning the hot, sand laden desert-wind came rushing over the water, and Morrell recorded: "Moving pillars of sand rose about five miles inland, increasing in magnitude, left the shore and crossed the bay. One of these columns of sand passed within a cable's length of the Antarctic. It was about eighteen feet in circumference, conical, and two hundred feet in perpendicular height. Its heat in passing the vessel was felt, and there was a strong odour not unlike sulphur. The thermometer showed 113 degrees. Finally the column fell into the water. Is it not probable that the seals were overwhelmed and suffocated by one of

these sand-spouts bursting upon them, accompanied by the sultry, stifling sand-winds which created it?"

Bob Rand says it was impossible, and I agree. If you have seen those columns of sand you will remember that the area affected by them is comparatively small. Even a long series of such columns could never have suffocated half-a-million seals. Moreover, the natural reaction of a seal which experienced unpleasant weather on land would be to slither immediately to the safety of the sea. No, it was some "pestilence or plague" that killed them. Rand has shot and examined many seals for scientific purposes; he found they suffered from worms and other diseases; but it was something more serious than the complaints he studied that finished off the Possession Island seals.

There were still a few seals on Possession Island in the 'eighties of last century. I have seen a statement by one of the old headmen, Frank Kuhl, who reported in 1883 that seals were destroying the birds on the island – a queer war to observe. About the same period thousands of penguins died on Possession, and the labourers had to wheel them down to the beaches in barrows. Today the seals haul up only on the islets and rocks. And the Possession Island pestilence remains a deep mystery.

Possession Island has reefs and blinders which make the approaches dangerous in fog. Once you have picked up the navigation marks, however, it is a simple matter to reach the calm anchorage off the settlement.

Here ships are safe in almost any weather, which is more than can be

said for the precarious anchorages off the other guano islands. For this reason Possession was a favourite resort of the old American whalers, before Morrell's time and long afterwards. It was one of many lonely islands off the African coast where they boiled down their blubber on the beaches.

Sir James Edward Alexander, the British explorer, was prospecting this coast for minerals only a few years after Morrell's voyage when he met the crew of a Nantucket whaler. His account of the conversation is vivid and amusing.

Alexander saw one of the whaler's boats nearing the beach with a shark in tow. He and his men were bearded, they wore ostrich plumes in their hats and carried guns. At first the Americans hesitated; then they heard Alex-

ander's men shouting in English and so they stepped on shore and shook hands.

"What gang do you belong to?" inquired the American mate.

Alexander explained that he had come from the Cape of Good Hope on an expedition of discovery. "Oh, Hell!" answered the mate with a half-incredulous look. Alexander goes on:

"I asked what ship had anchored in the bay, and the mate said it was the Commodore Perry, Hoborn master, from New England. ... The captain came up in a friendly way and said he thought we were shipwrecked mariners, for he had never seen or heard of white men before in this section of Africa. He guessed that we should like to come on board and drink a glass of grog.

"I told them we had suffered so much from want of water that sweet or brack, clear or muddy, was all the same to us provided we got a belly-full of it.

" 'That's damned hard, I swear,' cried the carpenter of the whaler.

" 'Can we get any green or fresh here?' (vegetables or fresh meat) was next asked.

" 'We have seen none yet,' I said; 'we are ourselves much in want of provisions, and would be glad to trade with you for a little ship's beef and biscuit.'

" 'What can you miss?' was asked.

" 'Some rope, knives, sambula or whips of rhinoceros hide, pipes and zebra head skins for pouches.'

“I went off with the Americans toward the boat, and we found it high and dry, with the boat-keeper asleep in it. He was saluted with this strange abuse. ‘You’ve been taking a dodger, eh, you damned heel.’

“I was hospitably entertained on board the Commodore, and enjoyed especially the biscuit, potatoes and penguin’s eggs boiled hard, the yolk of which is capital eating. Captain Hoborn said he thought of remaining four months on the coast, that he was now looking out for hunchback whales, and that they had already got some fish lower down the coast. They had never heard of any British whalers in those waters and said that our people seemed to overlook the fishing on the African coast almost entirely.

“Another whaler now appeared in the bay, the Pocahontas, Captain Menter

from Portsmouth, United States. This ship having been out longer than the Commodore, and having had no ‘green or fresh’ for some time, was afflicted with scurvy, but which I saw cured in a simple and novel way. Captain Menter got some potatoes from the Commodore, and bringing his patients on deck he made them eat, for three or four days, a few raw potatoes, washed and sliced, and the effects of this treatment were astonishing. The men’s gums, which before were white and sore with disease, resumed their natural colour, and the other symptoms of scurvy also left them.”

Hottentots were still regarded as strange specimens of humanity during the first few decades of last century. And indeed the primitive, pure-bred

Hottentots who came down to the coast of South-West Africa in those days, to gaze in wonder on American whaler men and other sailors, were people worth studying. Often enough they were confused with the Bushmen – a pardonable error for a sailor to make as modern anthropologists are still arguing over the possible relationships of the two races.

Morrell did a service to later travellers by pointing out that the Hottentots were not hostile. “There is no more danger in travelling into the interior of this country than there is in travelling from New York to Boston, provided the party take no arms with them and no more wearing apparel than is absolutely necessary,” Morrell wrote. “On all my excursions into the interior I was careful to go unarmed and dressed in nothing but a pair of duck

trousers and a duck frock. Thus presenting nothing to excite their cupidity I was invariably treated by the natives with the greatest kindness and hospitality, as they would freely share with me their last morsel of food.”

It was Morrell, too, who pointed out that the desert coast was not entirely waterless. “I found many places where fresh water may be had in any quantity by digging very shallow wells,” he said. “The naiads of these fountains are female Hottentots, who, like the damsels of Padanaram, are drawing water for their flocks. They, as well as the other sex, are very friendly and will furnish a stranger with refreshments and the most trusty guides if he wishes to perpetrate the interior. The Hottentots catch many oceanic birds in the laying season and bury them in the

sand with their entrails in them until they become quite green. This takes all the fishy taste from them and they become very tender. They then take out the entrails, skin the birds and dry them in the sun, which will so effectively cure them in forty-eight hours that they may be laid away for twelve months. Such is the purity of the air on this coast.”

One or two Hottentots, victims of showmen, found their way to Europe and were exhibited like wild beasts. Such a one was the famous “Hottentot Venus”, who died in Paris in 1815. Hottentot women often reveal a physical abnormality so ludicrous that those who have not seen it before find it hard to believe their eyes. This is called *steatopygia*, an elongation of the buttocks caused by fat. In extreme cases the buttocks protrude so far that

it is possible to place a tray on the fat and leave it there as though it was standing on a table. Before the First World War the museums in Germany used to send to South-West Africa for specimens of Hottentot women displaying this abnormality; and corpses were shipped in barrels of preservative. One hopes it was done in the interests of science.

Possession Island provided the South African Museum with a life-cast of one of the finest specimens of Hottentot girlhood ever discovered. During the early years of this century the South African Museum in Cape Town had an enterprising French curator named Dr. Louis Peringuey. The curator was fortunate in his taxidermist, Mr. James Drury, a clever Scot who had devised his own method of making life-casts. Drury started with

masks and finally produced unique casts of the whole body. He has kept his secret to this day, though museums all over the world covet his work.

Drury travelled into many far corners to secure his life size and lifelike effigies of vanishing African races. Even early this century it was not easy to discover Bushmen and Hottentots of the various clans who had not mixed their blood with other peoples. He searched South-West Africa for pure, typical, coastal Hottentots. Sometimes he found them; but they were under missionary influence and refused to submit to Drury's secret casting process in the nude.

One day word reached the museum that suitable, pure-blooded Hottentots would be found living in isolation on Possession Island. The headman at that period was Gus Hagstrom the

Swede (formerly of Sinclair's Island) and he had taken a Hottentot wife and raised a half-breed family. They were no use to Drury, but there was also a pure Hottentot family employed on the island. Drury was sent off at once in the small coasting-steamer Kanza, commanded by the redoubtable skipper Edward Wearin. You will hear more of Wearin and his escapades in little ships among the islands.

It was in 1915, soon after the wreck of the British Prince, when Drury landed on the island. The beaches were strewn with wreckage, and Gus Hagstrom's house was furnished with saloon chairs of carved oak, carpets, blankets, cutlery and plates from the wreck. Drury lived with Hagstrom and set to work immediately making full-size life-casts of the Hottentot and his wife. They were the finest examples of

the coastal tribe he had ever encountered and the women –judged by Hottentot standards – was extremely good-looking. You will find both of them in the South African Museum to this day.

Death-masks are simple in comparison with life-masks, for the obvious reason that the problem of breathing does not arise. I asked Drury casually what sort of technique he used, and here is his answer:

“You can kill a person with plaster of Paris. I never had any lessons. When Dr. Peringuey first told me that he wanted life-casts I started my experiments with Old Tom, an American negro who did odd jobs in the museum grounds. After a time I produced a perfect head and shoulders. Then I found an interesting Hottentot in the Roeland-street gaol in Cape Town and

perpetuated his features. At first I put quills in the nose to get the air through, but very few people could stand the irritation of the membrane by the quills for ten minutes or more while the plaster was hardening. So I discovered a way of leaving holes for breathing – a trick I invented myself. I’ll tell you another thing ... I always did the face last, and I devised a method of allowing the person to keep his eyes open. You won’t find my secrets in any text-book and I’ve never written them down. If my pension had been a bit larger, I might have recorded the process for posterity.”

Drury often moulded the bodies of his subjects in one piece. He studied their natural postures, took more measurements than a tailor, and then spread his own secret preparation all over the skin to prevent the pores being closed.

After that he supported the body in a realistic position and applied the plaster. It is an ordeal for the subject (Sandow, the strong man, once submitted to a British Museum expert and declared afterwards that he had never before known such intense physical strain as the hardening process). Drury gave his Hottentots tobacco, and under his skilful fingers there were no complaints. The casting is done from the mould, of course, and then painted. Drury's finished casts are marvellous examples of a rare form of art, and museums in the United States have offered high prices for his Bushmen effigies. But the South African Museum authorities will never sell them. They are unique.

It was a queer fortnight that Drury spent on Possession. He completed his main task in a few days and then

busied himself digging up marine fossil specimens and searching the caves at the northern end of the island. As it was the off-season, there were just the two families, with Gus Hagstrom as the only other white man.

"Hagstrom was acting queerly, and I soon learnt that he was a drug addict," Drury recalled. "One day he was friendly, the next aloof. Wherever I went on the island he followed at a distance and watched. I formed a strong impression that Hagstrom had buried something valuable – it may have been diamonds for he had worked on the mainland and knew a lot about diamonds. Or possibly it was something from the wreck of the British Prince. Anyway, he did not intend to let me get away with it, and it was no use telling him I was looking for fossils."

Drury had his meals with Hagstrom in the wood and iron building lined with planks from wrecks. There was a fine old "pepper pot" of the type used for drying ink with sand before blotting-paper was invented. Hagstrom had other antiques, too; he asked Drury to value them, but he refused to sell them.

"Hagstrom's half-caste children were getting no education at all, and I promised to send him some school-books from Cape Town," said Drury. "I made up a parcel soon after my return, but they were sent back to me. I made inquiries and heard that Hagstrom had been found dead in his bunk not long after my departure. He had taken too many drugs. His family had left the island. And Hagstrom's treasure, if he had one, still lies buried on Possession.

"All the way up that desolate coast were men who had cut themselves adrift from the world. I met a brother Scot, a doctor with an Edinburgh degree, living in a hut with a Hottentot wife. A member of the family made a special journey to South-West Africa to rescue him from that degradation. The doctor would have none of it. He lived and died in that hut in the dunes. And there was another educated man, full of kindness, but ending his days in loneliness with the Hottentots on the coast. I asked that man what he would do if he had a letter from home. 'Tear it up unopened,' was the reply. Yes, I met odd characters up there. Good fellows at heart ... but something went wrong and they stayed on the islands or in the desert. I tried to work it out. I never found an answer that satisfied me."

As guano islands go, Possession is not an unpleasant spot. There is talk of sending a motor-truck up there to replace the rusty rails and cocopans used for carrying the guano sacks from the northern and southern penguin rookeries. Off the northern end is an islet called North Island, worked by boats. In the south is a pretty little bay with pebbles and agates such as one finds on the diamond diggings (that is another chapter of Possession's weird story). The rugged western shore has some grand scenery.

Yet this island has left a sinister impression on the minds of many visitors. They could not have seen Mercury Island; that is an island where one might indeed make an appointment with Fear. But just listen to this description of Possession

written by Washington Fosdick in his private journal. Fosdick was steward of the schooner Emmeline of Mystic in 1843, and his journal is preserved in the New Bedford whaling museum. He wrote :

“The island presents a most forbidding and repulsive aspect, one at which the mind recoils with horror. It appeared as though it had never been made for the use of either man or brute, but had sprung into existence through some of nature's wild freaks, the vomiting of some subterranean fire. Possession is the name of it, and the rightful proprietor we presume is the Simoon of Africa, as its dry, arid surface too plainly indicates. Seal, however, have been taken here in great numbers, to judge by the quantity of bones strewed upon its barren surface; and although they showed instinct in selecting this

void in creation as one of their numerous haunts. yet man has followed and swept them from the island.”

A thoughtful friend of mine who called at Possession almost a century after Fosdick felt the same sense of nausea. “The island is two miles from the mainland, but it might be a million miles away,” he said. “It is like a slice from another world, a weird, ancient world. With a fantastic mood upon me, I like to imagine it as a meteor flung from a far planet into the South Atlantic, and then forgotten.”

It is the thought of water shortage that frightens some people on these islands. Back in 1892 the water barrels on Possession were running dry, so a volunteer was landed on the mainland at Elizabeth Bay and sent off through the sand to find help in the German

settlement at Angra Pequena. He died from thirst just outside the settlement; the Germans found his body on a dune, someone identified him and guessed his mission. That man’s sacrifice saved the rest of the island crowd. After that experience, sun condensers were set up on Possession, a terrace of glass over which sea water trickled, leaving most of the salt behind. The condensers supplied about seventy gallons of fairly fresh water a week. But as one of the old hands remarked to me: “You had to get used to the flavour.”

Elizabeth Bay was sheer desert before the diamond discovery, save when a party of Hottentots camped there to trade with the island people. I was at Elizabeth Bay in 1947, and I found an almost abandoned town there. Diamonds were still being recovered

on a small, scale, but the theatre and club had been stripped of timber, there were streets of roofless houses, and only the manager's mansion stood intact.

Now I am on Possession Island. Dimly I can see the mansion where I sat drinking beer and examining diamonds two years ago. But it has an air of unreality. As my friend said, this island might be a million miles away. There is no contact with the diamond coast. In the morning the Gamtoos will steam on to Ichaboe. Tonight the anchorage. is quiet and I can hear music and singing. They tell me that Churchill Louwrens has finished his long day's work pumping water into the tanks. Now he is playing his guitar, entertaining the island assistants, the young white bachelors who help the headman.

I am coming back to Possession before this voyage is over, and I shall have much to say about the diamonds and the treasure. Yet I stand here staring through the darkness at the hump of the island long after Churchill Louwrens has put away his guitar. The past holds me again, Possession's past and all Possession's exiles. Someone beside me points to the silent buildings on the island. One light remains.

"That's the light in the labourers' quarters," says the man beside me. "They'll burn that lamp all night. These coloured labourers are afraid of the dark – they think Possession is haunted."

So they think that, do they? Is it the graveyard they fear, the woman without legs and the spectral hounds? Or does poor Gus Hagstrom still roam the island seeking his treasure?

Probably none of these, but some other
chilling terror of which I know
nothing.

Chapter 5

TREASURE ON THE ISLANDS

*Haul out the Jolly Roger, boys, and
make for Mary's isle,
Where Poll and Sue are waiting in
their cabins by the palm;
Where the islands smell of
ambergris and the ladies smell
of balm;
We'll broach a keg of arrack and
bomбу we will drink,
We'll barbecue a hog, my boys,
we'll soak until we sink,
We'll drink, drink, drink, we'll
drink until we tire.*

No such delights awaited the pirates who landed on the guano islands and the desert coast, but there is no doubt they were there.

They had to do without Poll and Sue, though they may have consoled them-

selves with Hottentot girls. Instead of roast pork they ate seal meat. As for liquor, they must have taken it with them. In the eyes of the pirates, however, the great charm of this lonely coast was the immunity they found there – the sense of being beyond the law and out of reach of the gallows.

These outlaws of the seas had to careen their ships from time to time. They found sanctuary in remote bays and lagoons, scraped the barnacles and weed from the hulls, and floated off at high tide knowing that they possessed the speed so necessary for successful careers in piracy.

Captain William Kidd, most notorious of all pirates, called at Angra Pequena and Possession Island during the celebrated and well documented cruise in 1696 from New York to the African

coast and Madagascar. He held a commission signed by the Earl of Bellomont (then Governor of Massachusetts) to capture certain pirates on a “no plunder, no pay” basis. His ship was the galley Adventure. It was during this cruise that Kidd turned pirate himself. He took many rich prizes, and at the end he was arrested in Boston, tried in England and hanged. His treasure has never been found, and there are many legends of hiding-places. Some say the cache was on Long Island, New York, but several parties have searched there in vain. Those who have combed the Cape archives for clues tell me that the coast of South-West Africa or one of the islands may reveal Kidd’s treasure one day.

Early this century four Spanish doubloons and the lid of a treasure chest

were found by a white digger on Possession Island. He sold the coins to a German collector at Luderitz and bought cases of corn whisky. When he returned to Possession his mates reported that they had found no more coins, though they had excavated the whole area of the discovery. I had these facts in a letter from an old-timer who was present. His description of the celebration which followed throws a lurid light on the hard citizens of the islands.

“I have visited many parts of the world and seen the men of the Bowery, the Boca and the Santa Teresa in Montevideo,” he declared. “But for sheer unadulterated cussedness the men of the islands were hard to beat. When they heard that the Spanish doubloons had been converted into whisky, all hands and the cook left the

island. Two whale-boat loads of wicked humanity pulled over to the mainland opposite. There was a Hottentot camp of twenty or more huts. The men gathered a tremendous supply of driftwood and made a bonfire. Round this the sealers and diggers danced, each accompanied by his Hottentot girl. As the liquor began to work they divested themselves of their clothes, and at midnight the scene beggared description."

Not long after this episode, in August 1906, word reached the islands that a treasure ship was on the way. She was the sixteen-knot steamer Xema (pronounced Zeemah), chartered by Lord Fitzwilliam of County Wicklow, Ireland, a good sportsman who was always ready for a gamble (he had been to Cocos Island himself in search of pirate's gold). Other members of

the syndicate were Sir Alexander Muir-Mackenzie, a Scottish financier; while Mr. E. Kenyon Collis, a mining expert, sailed from England in the Xema.

Contrary to all the laws of secrecy governing such enterprises, Sir Alexander Muir-Mackenzie let slip a most unfortunate remark to a reporter just before the Xema's departure. "This expedition," he said, "is in search of treasure on an uninhabited island off the coast of South-West Africa." But for that remark, the Xema would have had a clear field and her men would probably have collected a fortune.

As the Xema steamed south there was much gossip in Cape Town about her purpose and destination. Those were the days before radio, and nothing came from the Xema. All unknown to

the treasure-hunters, however, the British Admiralty had decided to take a hand in the game. Then, as now, the islands off the South-West coast were forbidden areas. Two cruisers of the Africa Squadron happened to be at Walvis Bay, and they were ordered to intercept the Xema. In addition, the small coasting-steamer Burton Port was sent to Plumpudding Island – the only uninhabited guano island on the coast – to await the Xema and warn her off if she put in there. Never did treasure hunters face longer odds.

Even then Captain Temperley Grey of the Xema might have evaded pursuit, but he had to call at Swakopmund (only twenty miles north of Walvis Bay) to pick up a passenger. The passenger was another mining man whose knowledge was essential.

Word reached the naval squadron that a black-painted steamer with three masts and a yellow funnel had anchored in German territorial waters off Swakopmund. She was the Xema all right, and the passenger, Mr. William Griffith, boarded her with the news of the hue-and-cry which had been raised. Captain Grey then blacked out his ship and stood out to sea in the darkness for fifty miles. The two cruisers, the flagship H.M.S. Terpsichore and H.M.S. Pelorus, were thus temporarily baffled. They steamed down the coast towards the guano islands, however, keeping a sharp look-out.

Meanwhile the Xema had reached the neighbourhood of Luderitz. “We stood in for land, the description of which and the surrounding landmarks coin-

cided with my directions,” wrote Captain Grey in his log-book.

No sooner had the Xema anchored off Halifax Island than H.M.S. Terpsichore hove in sight. Captain Grey lowered his boats without delay and sent Mr. Griffith and a party of miners on shore; and in spite of the headman’s protests they started digging up the island.

The Xema was then boarded by an officer from H.M.S. Terpsichore and informed that the guano islands were “out of bounds”. Captain Grey went over to the cruiser to discuss the matter with the naval captain. Grey was a Royal Naval Reserve officer, and apparently he managed to lull the suspicions he had aroused and give satisfactory assurances. Terpsichore steamed off, leaving the Xema to continue the treasure hunt. She

returned next day, however, and this time she remained until every man and all the equipment were back on board the Xema.

Captain Grey and his mining experts were bitterly disappointed, but they still hoped to outwit the navy and uncover the Plumpudding Island treasure. As they steamed south from Halifax a small coasting-steamer, the Aurora, passed them heading north. She, too, played a part in the drama as you will hear.

As you know, the coaster Burton Port was lying in wait for the Xema off Plumpudding. Again the treasure hunters were baffled, and this time they decided to proceed to Cape Town and lay their protest before Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony – the leader of the Jameson Raid. On arrival

the Xema anchored far out in Table Bay, flying the "red B" flag signifying that she had explosives on board. Captain Grey refused to reveal the secret of the expedition to the reporters, but stated that he was furious with the Cape Government. "It is a curious law which prevents a British subject from landing on British territory," was all he would say. The ship was searched by the Customs authorities and police, and then it was revealed that she had a cargo of diamond washing machines, gas engines, sun condensers for distilling sea water, huts, tents and equipment for a long stay in a desert area.

Captain Grey put the whole case before Dr. Jameson. "We are after diamonds," he declared. "My principals in London received a pickle-jar of diamonds said to have been collected

on Plumpudding Island and other points on the coast of South-West Africa. Mr. Griffith found diamondiferous gravel on Halifax Island and the mainland nearby. The facts are indisputable. We discovered a fissure of diamond pipe, broken by the action of the sea, exposing a splendid face of diamondiferous ground. The wash revealed the peculiar and distinctive pebbles always associated with diamonds. If we had not been warned off by the Terpsichore we would certainly have made a sensational discovery. We now ask for a licence to prospect for diamonds on the guano islands. My syndicate is prepared to compensate the Cape Government in full for any loss of guano caused by our search."

At first Dr. Jameson was impressed by these arguments. Later his officials

advised him that the government had no option in the matter. Only an application to Parliament would secure the removal of the embargo on outsiders landing on the guano islands.

The Xema had run into debt while these negotiations were in progress. Finally the syndicate decided to abandon the quest, though the members knew they were giving up all hope of an immense fortune. Lord Fitzwilliam paid £1,000 out of his own pocket to clear the Xema of debt, and the ship picked up a cargo for Bombay and departed.

While the frustrated Xema expedition was fretting in Table Bay, the coasting-steamer Aurora was prowling about the guano islands in the hope of succeeding where the Xema had failed. The leading spirit on board the Aurora was Mr. Ambrose Carroll of

Cape Town, an adventurous soul who had been a shipping clerk, prospector and explorer of sunken wrecks off the Cape coast. He, too, had heard rumours of diamonds on the mainland and islands; and though he had no chart to guide him, the news of the Xema's quest had stimulated him to form a rival expedition before it was too late.

Carroll had heard from sailors and guano diggers of the volcanic "blow-out" on Plumpudding Island – the crater and tunnel which, according to all the laws of geology, should yield diamonds. The tunnel is just above high-water mark. In recent years it has been used as a resting-place for the coffins of men who have died on the island – the rocky little island where it is impossible to excavate a grave. Inevitably there are legends of stolen

“parcels” of diamonds hidden in these coffins; but the modern guano head-men are not so avaricious that they wish to find wealth in this way.

The Aurora, like the Xema, was pursued by the cruisers. Carroll was informed that he must not set foot on any island. As for the mainland, that was still German territory and he was forbidden to land there “as it might cause international complications”. The Aurora turned back, but that was not the last occasion on which Carroll tried his luck in those waters.

Twelve months passed, and another treasure ship came on the scene. She was the twin-funnelled steam yacht Alfred Nobel of Glasgow, and among her company were several British naval officers on leave, one or two Antarctic explorers, and others who

had joined the ship simply for the adventure.

A luxurious little packet was the Alfred Nobel with fine panelled cabins. Sometime before her treasure cruise a previous owner had been voyaging with his wife and child. A pretty governess looked after the child. When the treasure hunters showed visitors over the ship they took them into the former owner’s cabin and demonstrated a secret panel which could be raised to allow the owner to enter the cabin occupied by the governess. The discovery of the panel by the owner’s wife led to a divorce and the sale of the yacht.

It was in September 1907 that the Alfred Nobel arrived in South African waters. Her master, Captain Gardiner, let it be known that he was engaged in marine salvage work, thus showing

more subtlety than the Xema's people had used. The Alfred Nobel had come down the East African coast, pausing at Cape Guardafui to inspect the wreck of a steamer owned by the Sultan of Zanzibar. She had a cargo of tin worth £60,000, but Arab dhows were busy looting the wreck when the Alfred Nobel steamed up, and the Arabs fired on the newcomers.

Off the Zululand coast the Alfred Nobel anchored and located the half-submerged wreck of the schooner Dorothea. She had been lost about nine years previously, and it was said that she had on board gold bullion worth £500,000, which had been stolen in the Transvaal. According to another version, the Dorothea's gold had formed part of the famous "Kruger millions", and was being shipped away for safe-keeping during

the South African War. The captain; of the Dorothea, so the story ran, had placed the gold in the fore-hold and cemented it over. But the schooner was a leaky old ship with a mutinous crew. She had to be beached near St. Lucia Bay or she would have foundered. The Alfred Nobel located her all right, but there was too much surf for the divers.

Thwarted again, Captain Gardiner brought the Alfred Nobel round the southern tip of Africa, by-passed Cape Town and made straight for Saldanha Bay. There is a Dutch East Indiaman in shallow water there, the Middelburg, sunk in battle with a British fleet nearly two centuries ago. Peering through the water at low tide, I have seen her timbers in the sand. Many relics of the Middelburg have been salvaged from time to time; old cannon

and iron ballast. The Alfred Nobel's divers contributed to this nautical museum by bringing up muskets, cutlasses, boarding pikes and finally a fair amount of porcelain. Some of the cups fetched 15 apiece. But no doubloons. So far the Alfred Nobel had failed lamentably to pay her way.

Captain Gardiner's next objective was a treasure in South-West African waters. With the fate of the unlucky Xema before him, he showed considerable skill in shaking off suspicion. A British freighter, the Dunbath, had been driven ashore in a hurricane squall in Luderitz harbour during June that year, and all attempts to refloat her had failed. Gardiner announced that he was ready to tackle the job. The hull had already been stripped of copper, brass and cargo; the battered vessel was lying in a

rocky trap off Shark Island; she was a bad risk, or she would not have been abandoned. But the Dunbath gave Gardiner the excuse he was seeking.

Gardiner took the Alfred Nobel into Luderitz Bay at a moment favourable for diplomacy. The small German population had planned a dance that night in a warehouse on the waterfront. A military band had come down to the coast from the garrison town of Keetmanshoop; there were tables loaded with beer and all the flaxen-haired barmaids of Luderitz had been invited to the entertainment.

The adventurers of the Alfred Nobel were good mixers. They attended the dance, made a pleasant impression on the Germans, and returned the hospitality on board the yacht. Once again the secret panel was slipped

aside, with a barmaid impersonating the governess.

After much good-humoured beer-drinking, the Alfred Nobel's officers set to work examining the worthless hull of the stranded Dunbath. Boats and a steam pinnacle from the Alfred Nobel visited the two uninhabited bird islands in Luderitz Bay and ranged further afield along the foggy coast as far as Possession Island without any awkward questions being asked. The ship remained at anchor long after it had become obvious that she could not salve the Dunbath. It seems that her supply of liquor was inexhaustible. On shore Captain Gardiner was the most popular man in the port. Attempts to salve the Dunbath provided a perfect cover for other operations.

A secret shared by a dozen or more people cannot remain a secret very

long, but it was only after the Alfred Nobel's departure that the German officials at Luderitz learned the ship's true mission. One of the barmaids repeated the story that one of the treasure-hunters had told her.

She said they were after Captain Kidd's hoard. If they found it, they kept that secret at least. I do know that shortly before the First World War a German fossicking in one of the caves on Seal Island unearthed a metal snuff-box and some old bronze coins. Perhaps the Alfred Nobel's men had carried the rest of the treasure away. At all events they went about their treasure-hunting in the right way, in silence, without suspicion falling on them, without rivals, without any leakage of information until the last moment.

It may have been pirate's treasure, it may have been diamonds. Or they may have found nothing at all. In November 1907 the Alfred Nobel sailed for England.

Six months later a railway ganger named August Stauch was patrolling the newly-built line running inland from Luderitz with another German, Emil Kreplin, and a number of coloured labourers. They were in the dune area near the coast, and they had to shovel sand off the line after windstorms. During the lunch-hour one day a man named Kolman, who had worked at Kimberley, picked up a diamond and gave it to Stauch.

As a result of this find, Stauch became the richest man in South-West Africa, almost a millionaire, while Kreplin gained a large fortune. Both men took out prospecting licences, pegged large

areas, and when companies were formed they drew huge dividends. Between the wars, I met Stauch in Cape Town and heard from the discoverer himself the story of the diamond rush in the desert. Like many Germans, old Stauch had a poetical streak in him. He named one of his valleys of diamonds Ida Tal, after his wife; another he called Hexenkessel (Witch's Kettle) while the richest of all was the Maerchental – the “Fairy Story”.

Yet this must have been wealth of ill-omen. Kreplin lost nearly all his money during the inflation in Germany, and returned to a small farm in South-West Africa. In 1932 he walked into the sea and shot himself. August Stanch retained some of his fortune until the Second World War. In 1947 he died of starvation in Berlin.

Back in 1908 the desert diamond boom brought no misgivings – only a wild crowd of prospectors eager to risk their lives on the thirsty coast so that they might live happily ever afterwards. North and south from Luderitz they ventured, some on camels, others marching with pack-donkeys, while many chartered fishing cutters and even small steamers.

Along the desolate coast prowled the Panther, for a decree signed by the German Emperor vested all rights in the search for diamonds on the sea-floor within the three-mile limit in the German Colonial Treasury. Soon the most promising diamond areas on shore were seized by the German Government, and it became difficult for a foreigner to secure a prospecting licence. So enterprising men began to think of the sea – and the islands.

First victims of the Panther's patrol were the crew of the German cutter Stella. They were seen dredging the sea-floor with close-meshed nets near Luderitz, and when the Panther hailed them they replied that they were looking for oysters. A search revealed eleven diamonds weighing thirty-three carats. The cutter was confiscated and the whole crew went to gaol.

Down in Cape Town, of course, many old hands who knew the coast were itching to share in this wealth. Surely, they argued, the Germans could not legally prevent them from prospecting round the British-owned guano islands. Among the first to try his luck was my old friend Mr. David Wilson, a Scottish prospector who had been on the river diggings near Kimberley since the early years of the century. Now nearing eighty, Mr. Wilson is a

tribute to an open-air adventurous life; he still has sun tan, and he looks like a man in the sixties.

Mr. Wilson and his syndicate embarked in a Norwegian steamer, the Skramstad, which was carrying coal regularly from Cape Town to Luderitz. They had two open boats, and various hastily-contrived devices – grabs, dredges and bells filled with grease – for bringing up diamonds from the ocean bed. The Skramstad dropped this queer expedition at Possession Island and arranged to pick them up on her return trip to Cape Town.

It was a life of hardship in the open boats, Wilson told me, and they were not allowed to land on the island. At night they rigged tarpaulins and cooked a hot meal. They found gravel almost at once, but no diamonds. On several occasions they ventured away

from the island, risking an encounter with the Panther; and a few miles south of Possession they recovered a few pure white diamonds – gems bestowed on them by the dripping hand of the ocean. They were cheering this discovery when the Panther hove in sight, and only a providential fog saved them from arrest. Nevertheless, they had proved that it was possible to dredge diamonds and they returned to Cape Town in triumph determined to float a company and charter a ship for the purpose.

At this point the Cape Government stepped in and prohibited further dredging off the guano islands for fear of international complications. The German authorities had been complaining that large “parcels” of stolen diamonds had been finding their way from the mainland to the islands; and

the Cape Government warned all the island headmen to keep away from the shore.

This was the period which gave rise to many of the diamond legends of later years – the yarns of pickle-jars of diamonds buried on the islands or hidden in the coffins on Plumpudding Island and in other ingenious places. Some were true yarns. But the diamond syndicates in Cape Town were frustrated just as Captain Grey of the Xema had been; and only the boldest men dared to ignore the official bans.

I knew one prospector, a desert daredevil named Edward Heyes, who defied the authorities, German and British, in an effort to recover one of these hidden “parcels “. He received an incomplete message from a

prospector who had been imprisoned by the Germans – a man who had succeeded in burying his diamonds on an island which could be reached on horse-back at low tide. The prospector had fallen into the hands of the police soon afterwards; and the man who delivered the message to Heyes could not remember the name of the island!

Heyes had a great reputation in South-West Africa for his powers of endurance on foot. He risked his life often with only a few bottles of water; and he tramped the coast for weeks trying to find those diamonds. Several islands fitted the description. Heyes swam off to them, at night with the aid of driftwood and dug up the sand until at last he found the cache. “It was empty,” he told me solemnly. “I found the bottles my friend had kept the

diamonds in – but someone had got there ahead of me.”

So many tales of natural deposits of diamonds on the islands (apart from illicit caches) reached Cape Town that late in 1909 the Cape Government was being urged to send an official expedition to investigate the rumours. Mr. Ambrose Carroll, who had organized the rival expedition to the Xema, had applied for a prospecting licence and the newspapers were filled with stories of the new Kimberley which would be found under the guano.

A government commission visited the islands and stated that there was no diamondiferous gravel; but Mr. Carroll made a secret voyage as “purser” of a coasting steamer and returned with such glowing reports that the Cape Government was forced by public

opinion to take further action. So my friend David Wilson was engaged to carry out a full official search, for his previous experience on the islands and elsewhere fitted him for the task.

“I was on the Barkly West diggings at the time, and I was broke,” began Wilson in telling me his story. “Thousands of diggers would have taken the job, but I was selected and asked whether I would embark on a secret venture at a fixed salary. I had no idea where I was going.”

Only on arrival in Cape Town did Wilson learn that he was bound for the scene of his former exploit. He was instructed to prospect all the islands for diamonds. A government official, who knew nothing of diamonds, accompanied Wilson. The official, however, had equipped himself with a bottle of methylene iodide so that he

could carry out specific gravity tests. Diamonds sink in this liquid.

Wilson and the official sailed in the coaster Ingerid and landed on Possession Island on January 17, 1910. They tried a bay at the north end of the island first with two labourers digging holes near low-water mark and Wilson washing the gravel with a sieve. At the end of eleven days Wilson made an entry in his diary in red pencil: "Found two stones ($\frac{3}{4}$ carat)." The official was not convinced until the specific gravity test had been applied.

On the strength of this discovery Wilson made a trip to Cape Town for machinery, and returned with full equipment. Among the guano diggers who worked under him as diamond prospectors were Jack Ployer, a Nova Scotian who had spent years on the

islands; Jimmy Tulloch, a Shetlander, and a former ironmonger named Gilling. The labourers were Hottentots and Ovambos. With this force at his disposal, Wilson found many more diamonds in the wash – though the Ovambos were so raw that they had to be shown how to handle picks and shovels.

Wilson made a queer discovery at Auckland Bay, on the western side of the island. Little heaps of earth, covered with lichen, had been dug up years before; and to Wilson's experienced eye, this was undoubtedly the scene of a previous attempt to recover diamonds. He asked Gus Hagstrom, the headman, about it. Hagstrom was clear-headed in those days; he had not yet taken to drugs. "Yes, I know about those trenches," admitted Hagstrom. "It was long

before my time, when the American whalers still came here. One of the old hands told me that an American skipper prospected there and went back to Boston a rich man.”

Coasting-steamers and cutters called at Possession from time to time, and Wilson found chances of calling at the other islands. He discovered promising gravel on several islands, but he decided to make a thorough examination of Possession first. Wilson spent more than a year on Possession; he washed three thousand loads of gravel from different parts of the island; and in the end he recovered 2231 carats of diamonds valued at £511 10s. 0d. He kept a detailed diary; and from this and his own narrative I formed a vivid impression of life on Possession forty years ago.

There were no well-built houses in those days. Wilson lived in a deck-house washed on shore from a wreck. It had half-doors, and if he left the lower half open the penguins entered and stole his boots.

Heavy rain fell one day in March, and that was the only rain he saw during his whole stay on the island. For once he was able to have a fresh-water bath. At other times he had to use salt water, lathering himself with the whites of penguin eggs according to the old island custom.

It was a problem keeping the drinking water fresh in the iron tanks. They filled each tank to within a few inches of the top, then floated a board with a candle on the surface. The candle was lighted and the lid sealed to create a vacuum. But the water always had an

unpleasant taste; they had to boil it and make coffee.

Every night the cook put a few hundred penguin eggs in a huge copper boiler, and next morning fifty men ate the lot. That was the island breakfast. At other times the main dishes were either salt meat or fish. Sometimes they roasted young sea-birds – the regulations were not so strict in those days – and occasionally a pup seal was cooked. Wilson enjoyed “island soup” – a boiled mixture of dried fruit and salt meat. Greatest delicacy of all was roast flamingo, but that bird seldom visited the island.

Hagstrom and Wilson fattened a pig for Christmas, and spent many a pleasant hour discussing the treat in store. On his wife’s birthday Wilson opened a bottle of wine, and plum-

pudding was served. Long before Christmas the pig escaped from its sty, wandered among the penguins, and was chased over a cliff into the sea.

Fresh vegetables were hard to come by in those days. Wilson had bought five tons of pumpkins in Cape Town for the Ovambo labourers; but the Ovambos disliked pumpkin, threw it away, and went down with scurvy. That meant a trip to Luderitz in the whale-boat for green vegetables.

While he was in Luderitz, Wilson heard that a Scot named McKee was in distress. McKee had arrived there in charge of a consignment of mules and had gone to hospital with dysentery. The Germans said McKee was dying, and wanted to get him off their hands. Wilson took McKee back to the island with him and fed him on crushed biscuit and condensed milk until he

had made a complete recovery. After that McKee joined the diamond diggers.

On Sundays the island men worked on sealskins, making garments. The Hottentot women sat picking every single hair out of skin after skin so that only the fur remained. Sunday was the day for repairing and washing clothes, and fishing. Wilson noted in his diary: "Christmas Eve, 1910. Sat yarning in the galley until late. Trust all at home are happy." On the island Wilson's main concern was the health of his Ovambo labourers. They had come from tropical Africa to a climate of fog varied by high winds. They were paid fifteen shillings a month and "all found", which included cast-off army uniforms of the Boer War period, tobacco and matches. Wilson gave each Ovambo hot coffee and Epsom

salts every Saturday night. Apart from the scurvy, they kept fit and worked hard. They greeted the New Year on Possession by having bacon and flapjacks for breakfast. Then they sharpened their picks and went to work again.

"It was a queer way to spend a year – digging for diamonds on a lonely island," summed up Wilson. "I have washed gravel in many odd places, but I shall never forget the mixture of shingle, sea-worn gravel, seal hair, seal teeth, bones and clay from which I recovered diamonds on that island. For about twenty days in every month the south-west wind amounted to half a gale, and we were lashed by stinging spray. Yet after the Kalahari and Kimberley, that island had the charm of novelty."

Wilson returned to Cape Town in February 1911 to hand over the diamonds and report to the government. As I have said, the diamonds were worth £511, while the working costs added up to £825. Wilson was not surprised when the authorities decided to abandon the prospecting venture and avoid all risk of disturbing the guano-producing birds.

However, that was not the last that Wilson saw of Possession. After the First World War, and the disappearance of German gunboats from South-West African waters, a number of opportunists applied once more to the South African Government for a licence to dredge for diamonds. Prominent among these eager believers in deep-sea diamonds was Mr. Ambrose Carroll. Those few small stones brought up by grabs off

Possession had never been forgotten. This time there was no Panther lying in wait. This time there could be no international complications, for South-West Africa was German no longer. Mr. Carroll and his friends formed a company, rich Johannesburg leapt into the gamble, and South-West Diamonds, Ltd., went to the government with a claim that could not be denied.

Early in 1919 Carroll received a permit granting "the sole right to prospect for, win and recover by means of dredging and other suitable methods, diamonds from the territorial waters adjoining the mainland of South-West Africa within the area between a point four miles north of Possession Island and a point four miles south of Pomona Island."

Carroll then chartered the small coasting-steamer Nautilus. Amid the popping of champagne corks and the cheers of shareholders the Nautilus left Table Bay on February 28, 1919, bound for Possession. Captain A. P. Cooke was in command, and two divers and fourteen members of the diamond company travelled as passengers. Carroll and Wilson were there, and also a man named George Allen, known as Captain Allen though he held no certificate. Allen was familiar with the coast, and once the ship had left port Captain Cooke accepted him as the expedition's pilot.

The Nautilus called first at Luderitz, where the wife of the company's consulting engineer joined the ship. I remember the Nautilus, a fine little ship of her type with a comfortable saloon aft – a sturdy iron ship of 350

tons, built on the Clyde. She had been trading along that coast for years, taking prospectors to the original diamond rush, serving the guano islands, carrying all sorts of cargoes between Table Bay and Walvis Bay. She had been refitted for the diamond expedition, and her holds were filled with machinery and diving gear.

They ran into a strong southerly gale outside Luderitz harbour and that day most of the financiers on board lost interest in their romantic mission. Allen was on the bridge, advising the captain as the ship neared Possession. The idea was to start work at the south end of the island – where the previous expedition had left off owing to the arrival of the Panther before the war.

It was too rough, so the Nautilus headed for Possession anchorage. In the bows the mate was having

difficulty with the new windlass. Captain Cooke altered course to avoid a reef shown on the chart, and then left the bridge to help the mate. He left Allen in charge, with the Nautilus going full speed ahead.

Allen thought he had cleared the reef, and gave the helmsman a new course. A few moments later the Nautilus bumped, shook herself free, bumped again and remained fast on the rocks. Within five minutes all on board knew there was no hope for her. They ran up the distress signal and the island boats came out and rescued them – thirty-two crestfallen men and one woman who was glad to set foot on shore again after a day on the Nautilus.

Next day Captain Cooke visited the wreck and found she was full of water.

“If we had struck one of the blinders further out, all on board would have done the disappearing trick,” Wilson told me. “Our lifeboats were leaky, and the island boats would not have reached us in time.”

Wilson volunteered to walk to Luderitz for help, and was set down on the mainland opposite the island. It was a thirsty walk, it took him thirty hours, and on arrival in Luderitz he was glad to pay the usual fee of four shillings and sixpence for a fresh-water bath. “A good meal and a bottle of German beer completed that affair,” said Wilson. “Next day a steamer sighted the distress signal on Possession, picked up the ship’s company and brought them on to Luderitz, so I might as well have remained on the island.”

Undaunted by this severe setback, Carroll and his diamond seekers chartered another ship, the trawler *Eclaire*, and sent her off (with Allen reinstated as pilot) to restore the fortunes of the company and snatch the riches of the ocean floor from under Father Neptune's nose. But the valuable machinery had been lost in the *Nautilus*, the *Eclaire* was ill-equipped for her task", capital was running out and the enterprise had to be abandoned.

My friend David Wilson still believes in ocean diamonds. He has seen them; he would go again tomorrow if anyone offered him a ship.

"There may be a diamond-pipe running parallel with the shore-line," he declares. "Or it may be that age-old processes of disintegration have resulted in diamonds being deposited

on the sea-bed. I have proved that diamonds are there – and there must be many more."

Ambrose Carroll, a philosophic man, remarked to me: "It just proved how futile it is to attempt to recover anything from old Father Neptune once he has made up his mind not to let go."

The only man who profited by the *Nautilus* fiasco was a scientific friend of mine, Commander W. J. Copenhagen. Some of the gear from the *Nautilus* was salvaged. Copenhagen examined it and found that the anchor-chain was an astonishing sight; it looked as though chunks of metal had been bitten out of it. Seeking a reason, Copenhagen discovered that the reef which the *Nautilus* had struck consisted of rich copper ore. Electrolytic cells had formed in the sea-water, and intense corrosion of the

steel was the result. That anchor-chain started Copenhagen on a career of investigation into marine corrosion which went on for decades, until he won international recognition for his work and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Chemistry in Britain.

This has been a long treasure-cruise from Captain Kidd to the Nautilus, but the last word has not yet been said on the treasure of the islands. In those waters the unexpected does happen. On those isles the past does sometimes become alive. More gold coins, more diamonds have been found than the occasional discoveries reported in the newspapers. The fast-vanishing headmen and diggers of the old days, the retired coasting skippers and other adventurers of the desert coast could say a great deal – if they cared.

Wherever you go on the islands there are treasure yarns. Some are true yarns.

Chapter 6

ICHABOE

HOW COMFORTABLE it is to lie in one's bunk, find the steward at one's side with the early morning tea, hear the anchor coming up and the engines thumping, and just lie there watching a golden circle of sea flowing past the port-hole. In the past, and in a small way, I have taken part in the work on board ship. Now others are doing it. I am going on to Ichaboe, and finding pleasure in a perfect form of relaxation.

Down aft over the engines is the bathroom, where a touch of steam gives me a hot fresh-water bath. That is more than many mail boats provide for first-class passengers. Peaches on the breakfast table, and a boiled penguin egg, my favourite breakfast dish. When I saw the Gamtoos along-

side the wharf I wondered. Now she has become my home and I want no finer private yacht.

As I smoke the first cigarette of the day up in the sunlight on "monkey island" I imagine that the Gamtoos is sailing in company with a shadowy, bygone schooner. She is the Antarctic, filing abreast of us, running free with the sou'-wester from Possession to Ichaboe. Captain Benjamin Morrell is on her poop, and on the brink of his greatest discovery.

All the landmarks along this stretch of coast are familiar to me, Zweispitz Bay, Wolf Bay, North and South Long Islands (which are no more than exposed reefs), Halifax Island and Diaz Point. Away to starboard now is the Teutonic skyline of Luderitz, a port worth visiting; and I am glad to know that the Gamtoos will anchor

there later. Beacon after beacon stands out on the sandy shore, backed by the monstrous dunes, rock after sealing rock, Dagger rock, Dumfudgeon rock, Staple and Marshall, drops astern. Before lunch the Gamtoos is round Douglas Point and there are the gannets of Ichaboe hovering over the little, lozenge-shaped island like a multitude of white flies over an iced cake. The anchor rattles down and the echo reminds me that we are not alone. Perhaps I am the only one who can sense his presence but Morrell is with me today.

Ichaboe is the smallest of the bird islands on this coast. The highest point is only thirty feet above the sea; and if there was, not a rocky mass called Little Ichaboe between the island and the ocean, Ichaboe would be swept by every gale. The length of Ichaboe is

three-tenths of a mile, and the breadth one-tenth. I am told it is composed of granite, slate, stone and quartz. It is more thickly covered with birds than any other isle in the seven seas.

I had never dreamt of bird life in such profusion until I saw Ichaboe. This is one of the unknown wonders of the world. Naturalists have found a way of counting birds, and they say that in good seasons in the past twenty million gannets came home to roost on Ichaboe every night. That estimate may have been a few millions out either way.

This is not the height of the gannet season, yet I am gazing upon millions and millions of birds, concentrated on this tiny islet half a mile from the coast. It is white as chalk with them, the air is a whirring tumult of wings, their harsh cries fill the solitude with



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sound. Birds, wind, surf, the wild and incessant “para! para! para!” of the hungry gannets, the acrid ammonia odour of the guano ... that is Ichaboe impressing itself on the memory.

All the buildings on Ichaboe are bunched together at the northern end, on a space no larger than a suburban building plot. Between the houses and the birds stands a high wall. The people on Ichaboe live in a constant shower of feathers. But for the wall, the birds would smother them.

Steel rails are being floated ashore on oil-drums as I go over the side into the flat boom to land on Ichaboe. They are enlarging the island, building platforms of steel and timber, so that even more birds may roost there in comfort – and deposit their guano. This cunning trick was thought out by someone who observed the birds

clustering thickly on a disused jetty. Further up the coast, at a spot where I intend to take you, men have made fortunes in just the same way, by providing resting-places for guano-producing birds.

Ichaboe, by the way, is pronounced "Itcha-boo", like a sneeze. It is a Hottentot name, and some say it means "the lonely place". Well, there are less remote isles and certainly there are not many lonelier ones on this coast. The island was known and named long before Morrell's time. Seamen landed and watched the eddying millions of birds crowding the air. They saw the South Atlantic rolling in unbroken all the way from South America; to the east their eyes rested wearily on the desert dunes; they surveyed the desolate isle, the birds coming in from the sea in the

evening to their age-old breeding place; and then those early visitors decided that it was no place for human beings and thankfully they departed.

Morrel came here looking for seals. Imaginative man though he was, he failed to visualize the enormous wealth beneath the birds. It was on October 6, 1828, that he landed and noted: "This is a fine place for making captive the great leviathan of the ocean, the right whale, great numbers of which strike on this part of the coast about the middle of June. Eggs may also be obtained here in great quantities. In the months of October and November this island is literally covered with jackass penguins and gannets. This island is formed of volcanic material and its shores are resorted to by multitudes of fur-seal. We took about a thousand of their

skins in a few days. The surface of this island is covered with birds' manure to a depth of twenty-five feet."

If Morrell had killed a million seals instead of a thousand, he would not have secured a prize so valuable as that bird's manure. If he had called at Ichaboe only a few years later he would have realized the importance of his discovery. The fact is that scientists of the United States and Europe were not fully aware of the value of guano at the time of Morrell's visit to Ichaboe.

Morrell set foot on the mainland opposite Ichaboe and remarked in his enterprising way: "The south-east part of the bay is the finest place on this part of the coast for jerking beef, it being only four miles from a Hottentot village which will supply any number of cattle." He travelled a little way into

the interior, noting the "leopard and fox skins, ivory and ostrich feathers" offered by the Hottentots. He had eyes for everything but the guano. How he must have cursed his luck afterwards! "I had now fully made up my mind that a series of voyages to this coast for jerking beef and trading for other articles with the natives would prove a most brilliant enterprise and make fortunes for all concerned," he wrote. But not another word about that enormous mound of guano soon to be worth more than £2,000,000.

Morrell remained on the coast for a few months longer, and then sailed north to West Africa and so back to New York. His employer disagreed with him about the "brilliant enterprise" and Morrell never saw Ichaboe again. But that single sentence he had written – "the surface of this island is

covered with birds' manure to a depth of twenty-five feet" – was to start a dramatic episode that must have shaken Morrell when he heard of it.

Morrell was the first man to describe Ichaboe. Captain Gurdon L. Allyn of the schooner Spark of New London anchored there in January 1830, and wrote in his memoirs: "Too late for this season. An examination of the shore revealed about a thousand carcasses of seal which had been deprived of their skins by those who had arrived on a similar errand to ours."

The first edition of Morrell's book was published by J. and J. Harper, New York, in 1832 – "A Narrative of Four Voyages to the South Sea, North and South Pacific Ocean, Ethiopic and Southern Atlantic Ocean, Indian and

Antarctic Ocean. From the Year 1822 to 1831."

Three years later the first specimens of Peruvian guano were landed in Britain. For some time Alexander Humboldt, the scientist and discoverer of the Humboldt current, had been studying guano. The Incas had used it in ancient times; the Conquistadores had named the Peruvian islands "Sierra Nevada" (snowy mountains) because of the hills of white guano. But nothing more was done about it until Humboldt had proved that marvellous crops of wheat and turnips could be grown with the aid of this first commercial fertilizer, so rich in nitrogen and phosphates.

This was a slow process. By 1843, however, British vessels were carrying thousands of tons of guano away from the Peruvian islands, and Liverpool

merchants were alive to the importance of the new trade. It was at this period that a copy of Morrell's book fell into the hands of an alert Liverpool business man named Andrew Livingstone. He believed in Morrell, and above all in the truth of that single sentence which was to have such dramatic consequences: "The surface of this island is covered with birds' manure to a depth of twenty-five feet."

Livingstone found partners and three small sailing-ships were chartered and sent out with sealed orders. Ichaboe was not on any map at that time. The whole coast of South-West Africa was a no-man's-land, beyond the law, known only to the few whaler men and others I have mentioned.

One of the chartered ships returned to Liverpool and reported that she had

been unable to find the island. Another made the coast twelve miles to the north of Ichaboe and anchored. Her master set out to explore in his jolly boat, reached Ichaboe and landed; though he nearly knocked his boat to pieces in the surf. He was short of fresh water, and when he found no water on the island or the coast he decided to make for St. Helena. There he was offered a cargo for the West Indies. Abandoning his guano mission, he sailed away.

The third ship, the brig Ann commanded by Captain Farr, sailed first to Table Bay. Having secured details of the position of Ichaboe, Farr headed north again and located Ichaboe in March 1843. So little was known of conditions on the island that Farr had brought no materials for the construction of a landing-stage. He

had to take his boats through the surf again and again, but there were many days when loading was impossible. At the end of two months the Ann was only three-fourths laden. Then a southerly gale blew up. The brig parted her anchor chains and Captain Farr decided not to risk a longer stay. Already he had a fortune under hatches. He returned to England safely with the first of the Ichaboe guano.

Livingstone and his partners paid Captain Farr and the officers of the Ann to keep the secret. They shipped the crew away in other vessels, for they knew that their cargo of guano, selling at £10 a ton, would soon stimulate rivalry. But they did not know that while the Ann was lying off Ichaboe the crafty steward had copied the position of the island from the log-book.

Within a few days the secret was out. The steward had sold his slip of paper to the highest bidder – just the essential latitude and longitude “26 South 14 East”. Before that information became available, the ship-owners of Liverpool merely knew that the Ann had loaded her guano somewhere in the South Atlantic. If they had heard of Morrell’s book, of course, they would have had the key to the secret. Mr. Livingstone was careful not to lend that book. And it was not until the following year that a London edition was published.

British shipping was in a bad way in 1843. This was the most severe slump of the century. Liverpool was packed with starving sailormen. Ship after silent ship lay moored to the empty wharves. It was more than a trade recession during the “hungry ‘forties”

of last century. At any other time the Ichaboe venture would have been regarded as a wild gamble. In 1843 ship-owners were glad to embark on any enterprise which would keep their ships in commission.

So by November of that year several British sailing-ships reached the “Coast of Dead Ned” and cruised up and down in search of Ichaboe. One fetched up at Ichaboe by accident; others found it by a process of elimination. And all of them discovered that Captain Morrell’s guess about the guano was by no means exaggerated. At the northern end, the lee side of the island, the guano was forty feet deep. (For centuries the birds had found shelter there from the prevailing southerly winds.) In the south, the end favoured by the seals, the depth of the guano was ten feet.

I must tell you that between Captain Farr’s pioneer scratching of this hoard of “white gold” and the beginning of the rush, Captain Allyn called again, this time in command of the schooner Franklin in August 1843 (he had been to this lonely place thirteen years previously, you will remember, in the schooner Spark). Again he had come in search of seals. He must have been a man with a single-track mind, for he was astonished to find planks, wheel-barrows, pickaxes and bags of guano, left behind when the Ann made her hurried departure. It conveyed nothing to Captain Allyn. Like Captain Morrell he sailed away to slaughter seals.

First of the English ships to reach Ichaboe when the rush started was the ship Douglas, commanded by Captain M. B. Wade. He left this record: “On first landing in November 1843 on the

island which enjoyed for a time so odorous a celebrity the place was literally alive with one mass of penguins and gannet. They were so tame or rather so unaccustomed to man's appearance, that they would not move without compulsion. Thousands of the eggs of the penguin, collected by the sailors, formed a savoury addition to their usual rations of salt meat."

Captain Wade landed his men and pecked away at the cliffs of guano. He did not have a clear field for long. There was so much guano, however, that he welcomed the masters of the ships that followed and worked out a mutual benefit scheme to lighten the labour. These early shipmasters clubbed together, sent their spare spars, booms and topmasts on shore, erected stages and loading devices

with all the ingenuity of resourceful seamen.

Within a month every seaman in the small fleet off Ichaboe had become expert in taking boats through the dangerous surf. The rocky bottom was another difficulty, for unless the spars used for stages were wedged into holes the sea soon washed everything away.

Nevertheless these sturdy mariners rigged sheers and hawsers over the foaming surf to carry the guano sacks into the waiting boats. Some had "railways" with travelling blocks and hooks for the bags. Often enough the ships plunged violently at their anchors and all work ceased. But when the wind died the rich cargo came on board again. All hands toiled valiantly, for every sack loaded brought them nearer the day when they would leave

this desolate isle and make sail for England.

Towards the end of December the fleet off Ichaboe had grown to twenty ships, and there was some competition for loading facilities. A meeting of shipmasters was held, and Captain Wade was elected “apportioner and arbitrator”. He had already taken possession of the island in the name of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria. Now he wrote to the British Admiralty reporting his action and asking for a man-o’-war to be sent there to enforce law and order.

All these master mariners were dubious about the validity of Wade’s claim. They knew that the Portuguese colony of Angola lay a long way to the north, and that the Cape Colony began somewhere south of the Orange River; but the problem of ownership of this

desert coast baffled them. Wade ended his appeal to London with these words: “Your Lordship will know whether the Crown of Portugal can claim or not.”

Just about this time a grimy whaler appeared, flying the American flag. She lumbered through the British fleet off the north end of Ichaboe and her master hailed one of the anchored ships. “What in hell are you doing on that stinking island?”

“Loading guano,” came the reply.

“Guano and whale oil won’t mix,” shouted back the whaling skipper. He was just another American who missed a fortune. By now, hardly a day passed without a sail appearing on the horizon. The anchorage became perilously overcrowded, while hundreds of men were living on shore in

canvas shelters. Claims had been staked as though Ichaboe was a gold or diamond-field, and each ship's company worked its own "pit" and sent the guano to its own precarious jetty.

In the middle of January 1844 a "black south-easter", the wind most feared in summer on this coast, forced most of the fleet to run for open sea. Collisions occurred and two ships were driven on shore.

Even more serious was the state of affairs when the gale had blown itself out and scores of ships beat their way back to the Ichaboe anchorage. On the island all semblance of order vanished and was replaced by the law of the fist. Masters and crews who had once worked together were now filled with crazy greed. Stages and pits abandoned during the gale were seized by

newcomers. In the confusion they fought for the guano with spades and picks. The dead were buried in guano, unearthed by remorseless diggers and buried again.

By this time hundreds of men were camping on shore under canvas. Inevitably someone had brought liquor to the island, and the seamen, released from deep-sea discipline, became truculent. A "sea lawyer" named Ryan, a Liverpool-Irishman who had deserted from the British Navy, held a meeting and declared a republic. President Ryan ruled Ichaboe. No master or mate was permitted to set foot on the island, and any officer attempting to land was pelted with dead penguins.

It was at this difficult period that the first American ship arrived to load guano. She was our old friend the

Emmeline of Mystic, a staunch topsail schooner. The Emmeline had been hunting sea elephants on the Crozets, islands in the “roaring forties” of the Southern Ocean, even more remote, more hazardous than Ichaboe. She had put into Table Bay in distress with a leak; and there her master met Isaac Chase, the American consul. Chase, a patriot and a man with a keen instinct where his country’s trade was concerned, urged the Emmeline’s master to demand a share in the Ichaboe guano. Chase knew, of course, that the island had never been annexed by any nation. On his advice the Emmeline carried fresh water as ballast and a cargo of fresh vegetables. With these commodities, Chase pointed out, the Emmeline could buy facilities for loading guano.

The Emmeline called first at Possession, then at Seal Island off Angra Pequena. Several vessels, having tired of the Ichaboe chaos, were scraping guano of poor quality out of chasms in the rocky surface of Seal Island. It was typical of the guano mania of the period that men were willing to gather a poor mixture of seal and bird guano rather than wait their turn off Ichaboe. The Emmeline loaded fifty bags of this stuff and sailed on. There were thirty-three ships off Ichaboe.

“The shipping here are all English, our flag being the only American one,” wrote the Emmeline’s master.” The island appears like a human hive, the busy throng hurrying to and fro. The plying of boats back and forth forms quite an animated scene.”

President Ryan was pleased to accept water and food from the Emmeline, and the Americans were given the use of a landing stage. They threw the Seal Island guano overboard and loaded the pure Ichaboe deposit. When the Emmeline was full to the hatches the men cheered and all the other ships' companies responded.

"As we sailed away we gave them 'Yankee Doodle' on the flute," wrote the master of the Emmeline. "The Star-spangled Banner unfolded itself at the same time to the breeze. We had been extremely fortunate, more so than any other vessel of the fleet. Vessels which arrived before us are still remaining there without having received a single bag of guano. They have been compelled to put 1,000 to 1,500 bags on board some other vessel to secure the privilege of working a

pit, besides paying a heavy bonus of 130 to 145 sterling to that rascal Ryan for the use of a stage."

Ryan's island "republic" was not tolerated for long. The shipmasters wrote to the British naval authorities at Simonstown, pleading for a show of force, and in May 1844 the frigate Thunderbolt steamed up to the island. Ryan and his men realized that the days of sheath-knives and dead penguins were over. When the red-uniformed marines landed, there was no opposition.

Law had come to Ichaboe and the island needed it. By July, the fleet had grown to nearly a hundred ships and there were two thousand men on shore. This was a strange contrast with the empty island of Morrell's time – two thousand men fighting for privileges (when the marines' backs

were turned) on an island only a mile in circumference.

At last Admiral Sir John Marshall came up personally in his fifty-gun flagship Isis to take charge of the situation. He had been dealing with the last of the pirates in African waters, and he soon overawed the mutinous guano diggers. Marshall slipped up badly, however, when he decreed that only British ships could guano at Ichaboe. The energetic Consul Chase had no sooner heard of it than he protested to the authorities in the United States. "The island of Ichaboe lies outside the limits of the Cape Colony and is claimed by no state or nation," Chase pointed out. "I suggest that American whalers should sell their oil at the Cape and proceed to Ichaboe for guano." As a result of Chase's action, American ships were

awarded the same facilities as British ships.

And still the ships came. Admiral Marshall recorded his impressions of the scene. Here are his words: "Imagine a fleet of about 225 sail, some of them old and rigged out for the occasion, many with masters of irregular habits and insubordinate crews, seamen and labourers amounting to about 3,500 men of the lowest and most drunken class, crowded together in certainly the most boisterous anchorage in the world. It is a proud sight, nevertheless, to see so many craft all lying with their anchors ahead, amidst dangers of no ordinary kind. In coolly riding under difficulties that would appal most others they show daring and superior seamanship. The rollers are so heavy that the Isis has dipped her main-deck guns.

Moreover, there is no protection from a westerly gale, and but very partial shelter from any wind.”

As every fresh arrival sent diggers on shore, the Ichaboe population grew (in October 1844) to six thousand men. Much of the guano had been cleared by this time, and the northern end of the island was a town of flapping tents. Men skulked there by day and rioted by night. Tents were pitched so close together that it was impossible to detect truants or liquor sellers. Orgies were held. Behaviour in the camp became so vile that Admiral Marshall finally ordered every tent to be struck, every man to return to his ship. He had to land a strong force of armed seamen and marines to secure obedience. But after that the diggers slept on board their ships and came on shore to work at daybreak. Discipline was restored.

A queer discovery made at this period was a coffin with a well-preserved body. The inscription on the coffin revealed that the man was a Dutch sailor, buried on Ichaboe as far back as 1689. The coffin was found eighteen feet below the surface. Allowing six feet for the grave, the guano must have risen about twelve feet in 155 years.

November of 1844 brought an unexpected gale from the south. There were 250 vessels packed together almost stem to stern in the anchorage, all dragging their anchors, making sail desperately, fending off their neighbours, carrying away spars and bowsprits – every master and man praying for sea-room and finding none. Now the guano was forgotten. For one who could watch from the safety of the shore it must have been the sight of a

lifetime. Great feats of seamanship were performed that day.

Some of the most daring masters chose to beat out of the anchorage against the wind, risking the loss of their ships on the southern reefs of Ichaboe or on the mainland. They clawed off the land with the aid of every sail they could set, tacking only when the rocks showed under their bows. Side by side, heeling under the weight of the gale, these schooners drew away from the shore. Larger ships, square-rigged and unable to manoeuvre to windward in narrow waters, slipped their cables and went barging away to the north. Collisions and wrecks were inevitable. It says much for the skill of those old-time seamen that so many made the open sea with nothing more than scraped timbers and lacerated rigging. A dozen

or more unlucky ones found themselves on the beach.

A few old seamen who fought that gale off Ichaboe in November 1844 remembered another scene of destruction nearly forty years previously. They were men who had taken part in the battle of Trafalgar. After the Ichaboe ordeal one of them remarked: "The battle of Trafalgar did not present such a scene of havoc."

About 100,000 tons of guano had been removed before the gale. The records show that in December three hundred English and five American ships were loading at Ichaboe; and the peak of all this feverish activity was reached in January 1845. In that month four hundred and fifty ships lay at anchor off the tiny island.

“The wealth obtained from Ichaboe,” recorded a Cape Town merchant, “the ingenious machinery by which the guano was removed, the enormous fleet of vessels and number of men employed must strike every intelligent observer as presenting a very extraordinary example of commercial enterprise and hardihood. Though the thundering surf washed down landing-stages as fast as they were set up, there was no relaxation of effort. The weather only permitted, on an average, three good boating days in the week; on the other days it was generally impossible to land. On a fine calm day it was pleasant to stand on the summit of the rocky islet and look down on the busy hive below. One might see one party in a pit, amidst clouds of dust, digging guano while another was shovelling it into bags. On the shore a

long row of men would be seen tossing the bags into boats and returning rapidly for more. Then the deeply-loaded boat would pull off to the vessel, the crew on board would heave up the cargo, and their chanty would just reach the ear of the listener on land. It was a spectacle for the eye and mind which probably has never had a parallel in the history of commerce.”

From first to last about 300,000 tons of guano were shipped from Ichaboe to Britain and sold at an average price of £7 a ton. The last rock on Ichaboe was scraped bare by the end of May 1845; the island and the surrounding waters, which had seen so much hardship and hard work, so many narrow escapes and sudden deaths, were left to the birds.

Ichaboe saved British shipping at a time when Britain was going through vicissitudes comparable with those that came again a century later. Great firms sprang to life in Liverpool as a result of the reeking riches of Ichaboe. And all the time Ichaboe remained a no-man's-land, unclaimed by Britain in spite of the Union Jack that flew there.

A strange episode on a queer coast, all due to one sentence written carelessly by Captain Benjamin Morrell: "The surface of this island is covered with birds' manure to a depth of twenty-five feet."

For a few years after the looting of Ichaboe the islands remained silent save for the cries of the birds and the crashing of the sea. Few men landed where thousands had toiled.

This was just what wise Nature might have ordained. Cautiously at first, then glamorously, the ill-treated hordes of seabirds returned. They settled on their old haunts in thousands and in millions.

You might imagine, as I once did, that the period after the rush would be gone beyond recall. Someone was bound to have recorded the eventful years; but after the last ship had left, so I thought, the fog of a last past must have settled over the lone weird islands.

Then I found old men who had worked on the islands late last century and talked to men who had seen the rush. They were my living links. I read through all the guano island records in the Cape archives, turning over faded pages that no one had scanned for decades. And I learnt at last that a

century can be bridged, that nothing is lost if you go deep enough. The fog lifted, the adventurers of the second half of last century lived again.

It was in 1847 that Mr. Robert Augustus Granger, a Cape Town ship-owner who was known as the “Whaling King” of the coast, sent one of his schooners to Ichaboe to see whether any fresh guano had been deposited. The same idea occurred to others at about the same time. Liverpool was still interested in the island which had yielded so much wealth, and the firm of Gibson Linton sent their ship *Heroine*, commanded by Captain Tompkins. The mate of the *Heroine* was John Spence, who spent the rest of his adventurous life in those waters and became the central figure in many queer episodes, some extremely dubious.

Captain Tompkins was the first man to realize that if the birds were guarded the islands would again become valuable. He left a few men on shore at each island; and in 1850, by scraping a number of islands, he managed to secure a full cargo for the *Heroine*. That was really the beginning of the modern guano conservation system.

Ichaboe had to be shared with Granger and others, and for a time this amicable arrangement worked well enough. Among those who had entered the trade were the brothers Aaron and Elias De Pass; and John Spence joined them as captain of one of their ships, and later became a partner.

These brothers de Pass were descendants of Sephardi Jews who had settled in London in Cromwell's time.

They came to the Cape in 1846, opened up fishing-stations and traded with many remote bays along the west coast. They were not only in guano. Spence secured mineral concessions from Hottentot chiefs on the mainland, and the astute brothers wrung a huge fortune out of an apparently lifeless land. No doubt they had studied Morrell's book, and they acted where Morrell had pointed out the opportunities. Cattle, shark-fishing, snoek fishing, sealing – these were mere side-lines in the vast de Pass enterprise. They also built the first ice-factory in Cape Town and the first patent slipway for repairing ships on the shores of Table Bay.

So the de Pass firm and others put up the first wooden huts on Ichaboe, protected the birds and gathered the annual crop of guano. Harmony ruled

on the island which had seen much bloodshed; but it did not last for long. Captain Tompkins had in his employ a seafaring man named George Murison of Cape Town. Murison was dismissed and left Ichaboe swearing that he would have his share of the guano as he had as much right on the island as anyone else.

Murison had brothers and influential friends in Cape Town. They fitted out an expedition to take Ichaboe by assault; and as part of their scheme they engaged professional prize-fighters. One, named Sayers, was a brother of the Tom Sayers who faced John Heenan, the American, in the greatest prize-fight of ring history. He and his fellow-bruiser, Taylor, were paid £25 each for their services.

"I'll get the stuff off – or die on Ichaboe," declared Murison, with

these men behind him. He took his tough followers to Ichaboe in the schooner Flibberty and landed with nine men, all armed with revolvers.

If it had been a surprise attack it might have succeeded. The de Pass brothers, however, had got wind of Murison's intentions and had sent a "garrison" of forty men to the island. So when Murison landed he found a sandbag fort on the beach. Less confident now, Murison off-loaded his tents and equipment; but the defenders threw everything back into the boat and hurled so many stones that the boat nearly sank. Sayers and Taylor never had a chance to strike a blow.

Incidents of this sort occurred for years. One season the men occupying Plumpudding Island killed all the birds rather than allow rivals to seize the place. In spite of Captain Wade's

petition during the early days of the rush, Britain had not annexed the islands. It was the law of the fist again, and often enough the law of the gun. On many islands the keepers lived behind barricades, pelted newcomers with rotten eggs, and in the last resort used revolvers and cutlasses to defend their rights.

This desperate state of affairs might have lasted much longer if a new element had not entered into it. Granger had been shipping his guano to New York in American ships, and it was rumoured in Cape Town shortly before the Civil War that the United States intended to seize the islands.

How much substance there was in that rumour I have never been able to discover. American sealers and whalers had been at work for years on all the remote, unclaimed islands of

the Southern Ocean, often competing with the ships sent out by Cape Town owners. Those same American seafarers knew the southwest guano isles as intimately as New Bedford and Nantucket. I have found a reference by Captain Spence to an American ship which anchored off Ichaboe and found a strong force on the island. The Americans asked for samples of guano, but Spence refused to supply them.

De Pass, Spence and company kept a tight hold on the southwest coast in spite of the uncertainty that prevailed all through the lawless eighteen-fifties. Captain Spence once consulted the Attorney-General of the Cape, Mr. Porter, and received this advice: "Don't shoot anyone, but keep them off the islands in any other way you can."

Aaron de Pass sailed as supercargo in his own ships. His brig *Water Nymph* carried salted fish and guano as far afield as New York, Sydney and London; and during one visit to London, Aaron petitioned Queen Victoria to annex the islands. This had no immediate result. By January 1861, however, the situation had become so acute that Rear-Admiral Sir Henry Keppel, the British naval commander at the Cape, urged the British Government to take action. "You may recollect that in 1844 hundreds of vessels collected there to carry off the guano," wrote Keppel. "Ichaboe was cleared, the birds were driven away and no one cared about the place. Since that time two or three firms in Cape Town have sent people there to keep the birds from being disturbed during the breeding season. The result

is that guano is annually deposited to the value in money of £20,000. The increased supply has caused other parties to send people at the sweeping season to collect. Those in possession, who have been what they term cultivating the guano for the last twelve years, naturally claim the ground and have armed themselves, sixty in number, with revolvers. Other parties are likewise arming, stating that as the islands are unclaimed by anyone they have equal right to the guano, while I am called on by the good people of Cape Town to prevent bloodshed. Now I do not see by what right I can interfere in this 'no man's land.' Do you not think it advisable that the Government should authorize me to hoist the flag, and by making these dirty islands British property,

give me authority to keep order? Guano is daily increasing in value."

Apparently this report went into a pigeon-hole. Admiral heppel, after waiting for months for a reply, sent R .M.S. Furious to Ichaboe with instructions to annex the island.

They still have a wooden board on Ichaboe carved with this inscription:

NOTICE

This island of Ichaboe is this day taken possession of by me for, and in the name of Her Britannic Majesty Queen Victoria, and is hereby declared a dependency of the Cape of Good Hope

(Signed) Oliver J. Jones

21st June 1861. Captain, H.B.M.S. Furious. All claims as to right of soil or territory on Ichaboe are to be made

to His Excellency the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope.

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN

That should have settled the matter, but it did not. The following month the Cape Parliament appointed a Select Committee to investigate the question of annexation.

It is in the evidence given before such committees that the old characters of the coast live again. Their phrases ring down the years. You can see at once whether they were polite or truculent; you can hear the deep voices of seamen; often there is a sentence so vivid that the whole scene floats back from the past and is acted again before the eyes of the searcher in the Archives.

Captain S. Shepherd, master of the barque Hebe Augusta, was among the witnesses.

“Ichaboe is a very dangerous place,” remarked Captain Shepherd. “I have been three weeks lying off there without being able to load a sack of guano. The diggers receive £2 a month and all found, plus three pence for every ton collected. Headmen get sixpence to a shilling a ton.”

Mr. Robert Granger said he had purchased part of Ichaboe in 1852. He was thankful that Captain Jones had fired a salute of twenty-one guns at Ichaboe and left a Union Jack with the headman. “This will prevent the American government from taking the island,” declared Mr. Granger. “They were very near taking it, according to advices I received from New York. The Americans would turn us off.

They might treat us as the Portuguese did in the case of my brig Lord of the Isles at Great Fish Bay in Angola recently. Down south the Americans are working Heard and Desolation Island successfully. I tried it and lost £8,000.”

Ichaboe, went on Mr. Granger in evidence, was the only enterprise left to Cape ship-owners since the coasting trade had been thrown open to foreigners. He had a headman on Ichaboe who could work the island as no other man had ever done. His part of the island was regarded as valueless, but now he was gathering 1,500 tons of pure guano every season.

“One American ship came from New York to annex Ichaboe,” stated Mr. Granger. “We cannot protect ourselves unless we have a man-o’-war there or a large armed force. Americans fit out

slavers under the very nose of their government.” The Select Committee reported that “Her Majesty’s Dominion ought to be asserted over the following cluster of islands, namely, Ichaboe, Hollam’s Bird, Mercury, Long Island, Seal Island, Penguin Island, Halifax, Possession, Albatross Rock, Pomona, Plumpudding, Roast Beef or Sinclair’s Island”.

Ichaboe was annexed, but it was not until 1867 that Captain Forsyth of H.M.S. Valorous was sent to take possession of all the other islands on the list.

Just after the annexation the firm of de Pass, Spence put through their shrewdest business deal. I have mentioned the de Pass patent slip at Table Bay docks. This piece of machinery was so up to date and efficient that the London illustrated

newspapers devoted pages to woodcuts showing the design; and the Cape Government realized that such an asset to the port should be under official control. So the de Pass brothers let the government have it – the price being a monopoly of the guano islands for twenty-six years at an annual rental of £800 a year.

Mr. Alfred A. de Pass, son of Daniel de Pass, inherited the guano wealth. He was 88 in 1949, when he told me the story of the firm's success. Born in Cape Town, he left South Africa as a boy of nine to go to school in London and later to study chemistry at Gottingen University in Germany. After leaving the University he joined his father's firm. They owned twenty sailing-ships at that period; and Alfred de Pass met the ships at Rotterdam, Antwerp and other ports and analysed

the guano. "My eyes still water when I think of the ammonia in the guano," he recalled.

Alfred de Pass was still a young man when he retired from business and devoted his life to collecting paintings. For many years he had been giving his paintings 'away to art galleries in Britain and South Africa. His gifts are now worth many thousands of pounds – a single picture was valued at £11,000 – and Mr. de Pass is known in South Africa as the "fairy godfather of art".

It is a long way from Ichaboe to the famous art museums of Britain – but the stinking guano that men fought over with revolvers and cutlasses enabled Alfred de Pass to adorn huge rooms with masterpieces in oils. A strange transformation, but the islands

are full of strange tales. And the
strangest of all are true.

Chapter 7

WITHIN LIVING MEMORY

ON BOARD the Gamtoos there is a man who is my link between past and present on the islands. They call him Mister Milo, and he is a powerful man even in old age. He has a sailor's face that has weathered many storms. Emilio Barbieri is his true name.

Mister Milo cannot keep away from the islands, though he retired twelve years ago. Here he is, a passenger in the Gamtoos, going back on his tracks, living his years of exile again, and wondering – just as I am still wondering – whether he did the right thing. The answer eludes me, and possibly I shall have to leave it to you.

By this time, with the Gamtoos still landing steel rails at Ichaboe, one at a time, I have got to know Mister Milo

well enough to discuss deeper subjects than sea-birds. Yet it was unexpected when he burst out one day with these words:

“I am a lost dog – I wasted my life on this bloody island and my money is no good to me.”

Then I heard Milo's story, certainly the strangest any old sailor man has told me. Milo left his home, Rapallo in Italy, at the age of eleven and shipped before the mast in British ships. He was an old salt of fifteen when his full-rigged ship, the Carnarvon, put into Table Bay and discharged her cargo of Welsh coal.

“Everyone was jumping his ship in those days,” said Milo. “I slung my bag over the side one morning before daybreak and hid on board a little cutter with an Italian skipper. All I

knew was that I had to lie low until the Carnarvon had gone. I sailed up the coast with that cutter, and sailed back seventeen days later. The police spotted me. 'You're lucky,' they said. 'Your ship's gone.' That was the way I came to South Africa."

They were breaking up wooden sailing-ship hulks on the Table Bay foreshore, and young Milo found work at four shillings and sixpence a day. He learned the use of dynamite there. Every job teaches something and in later years Milo was thankful that he knew how to handle dynamite.

After the hulks he looked round for a ship. There was the schooner Sea Bird unloading sealskins. Milo jumped on board, walked boldly up to Captain Towns, and touched his forelock. "Thank you for a job, sir." Five minutes later he was slinging the

sealskins on shore. He stayed in the Sea Bird for twelve months and saw the desert coast and the islands. In 1892 he decided to work on shore for a change and was sent to Sinclair's Island. You remember the old-timer I mentioned who was put on shore there with an old mainsail and eight other men of seven different nationalities? The man who sat on diamonds without knowing it? That was young Milo. And that was the way he came to the islands.

He went to Ichaboe in 1900, and this time the island claimed him and held him for thirty-six years. Yes, that is a long time to spend on an island one mile in circumference and possibly those were wasted years.

"But what else could I do?" inquired Milo. "I am not a college man. I could have gone back to sea before the

mast when I was young, but the years went on and the time came when they would have said I was too old for a sailor. So I stayed on this island – and I made a bit of money. More money than I would have made at sea.”

I asked him what the pay was, but he shook his tough grey hair. “The pay was nothing wonderful,” went on Milo. “I had to wait several years before I got £6 a month ... and the island was worth £45,000 a year in those days. No, it wasn’t the pay. It was the sealing money, and the pigs, and other things.” Other things, I learnt, included shipwrecks. Milo had seen some dramatic shipwrecks. As a young seaman in the schooner Sea Bird, back in 1893, he was lying off Ichaboe when a sailing ship struck a blinder. The captain should have beached her. Instead, he headed out to

sea, lashed the wheel and abandoned ship. All that afternoon they watched the doomed ship sailing, and when the sun went down she was still just afloat and sailing into the west.

Another sailing-ship, the six-hundred ton barque Eurys, was lost at Ichaboe in 1896. She was a de Pass ship, and her master, Captain Lark, was making his last trip. For some reason which has always puzzled Milo, she was not insured.

“She reached Ichaboe in the evening, entered the passage with a fair breeze, and stood up for the anchorage,” recalled Milo. “As she turned she struck a rock, and Captain Lark let go the anchor. He was drunk – that’s the way a lot of ships are lost. Twenty old shellbacks were working on Ichaboe, and they pulled for the Eurys in the whaleboat. They brought off Captain

Lark and the crew and a whole cask of rum.

“Lark had a revolver and he was rolling drunk. When he saw the island men breaching the rum and filling buckets with it, he started shooting. It was lucky he was drunk. Those old shellbacks were afraid of the bullets, but they were more afraid of losing the rum. One man took cover behind the barrel and put his mouth to the bung – and all the time Captain Lark was shooting and laughing. They got the revolver away from him at last, and finished the rum. That was a proper Ichaboe shipwreck. Lark and his mate stayed on the island for weeks. They sent the men to Cape Town, hoping they’d go off to sea again before there was a court of inquiry into the wreck. Cook on Ichaboe at that time was a decent chap, Fred Abbott of Dover,

who had been a bank manager before he came to the islands. Fred wrote a letter to the owners of the Eurus, explaining how the ship was lost. She had broken up, of course, and we were using her as firewood. Fred Abbott’s letter said the Eurus was lost in a heavy south-west gale with thick fog. He certainly did his best for that drunken skipper.”

Milo’s best shipwreck was the Solingen, a German freighter that ran ashore in Hottentot Bay nine miles north of Ichaboe. It was in the early years of the century, when the Germans were at war with the Hottentots; and Milo’s merry eyes lit up as he related the escapade.

No sooner had the Solingen been abandoned than Milo and his men set off for the wreck in a flat boom and a whaler. They hoisted their boats clear

of the water with the aid of tackle dangling over the side, and then Milo went to work. He unscrewed lamps and mirrors in the saloon, and looked round for other handsome fittings. All his men had disappeared, and he thought they were very quiet.

Milo got his loot into the flat boom, then went in search of his men. At last he heard voices rising from a hatchway near the stern.

*Blow, my bullies, blow
For California, O.
There's plenty of gold,
So I've been told,
On the banks of the Sacramento.*

They were all there, and they had found the liquor. Each man had a case of beer between his legs. They drank and threw the bottles aside and they sang.

“Back to the island!” roared Milo; and they obeyed him. The flat boom was loaded with cases of beer, gin and brandy. They took casks of cheese, tinned meats, flour, butter and delicacies such as those old shellbacks had hardly tasted in their lives before. And finally they lowered the Solingen’s piano over the side and lashed it to the flat boom in such a way that they could slip it if the weather came up. Milo kept all the liquor in the flat boom and took charge of it. He knew his men.

Fog came up as they were pulling back to Ichaboe, and Milo thought the men in the whaler had all been drowned in the surf. They had to anchor for the night, but next day all hands made the island and the rich cargo, including the piano, was landed safely.

That was not their last visit to the Solingen. On another occasion Milo led his men into the engine-room and set them to work dismantling the brass and copper piping. He reckoned he had £750 worth of metal, and next time the schooner Sea Bird called Milo asked the skipper to take it to Cape Town and sell it.

“Don’t smuggle the stuff – the duty is only three per cent,” advised Milo. But the temptation was too much for the greedy skipper. He was caught smuggling it, fined heavily, and all the metal was confiscated.

Before the Solingen broke up the men from Ichaboe held a formal dinner-party on board. The island cook found the chef’s clothes, others dressed up in white jackets. They planned a magnificent menu with the aid of the stores on board, Rhine wines were served,

and the saloon rang with their songs. The liquor from the Solingen lasted them seven months on Ichaboe, the way Milo rationed it, and there was a sing-song every Saturday night with the piano and beer.

There was an unhappy sequel to these gay episodes. The Solingen was carrying ammunition for the German forces operating against the Hottentots in the long and costly war of that period. Somehow the cunning Hottentots came to hear of the abandoned wreck, and a guerrilla horde rode down to the coast to replenish their bandoliers.

They found four men from Ichaboe helping themselves to the remaining liquor. At first the Hottentots thought the men were Germans, and unslung their rifles. The island men explained that they had come from Ichaboe, and soon all were drinking together. When

the island men returned to their boat, however, there was a drunken brawl. One Norwegian and one Portuguese were shot dead by the Hottentots. The others pulled out of range and reported the attack.

It nearly caused an international incident, but when details reached Cape Town it was realized that the Ichaboe men had no right to be on the mainland. "The affair has no political significance," explained Sir Lewis Mitchell, acting Minister for Agriculture, in the Cape Parliament. "The two men who were killed were only obeying the impulse that actuates many others throughout the world who find themselves near a wreck that affords unlimited loot."

This same irresistible impulse drew Milo and his men to another wreck three years later. This time it was the

British cargo steamer Heraclides, bound from Liverpool to Luderitz; and she fetched up within thirty yards of the Solingen. All hands got away in the boats. No sooner had they departed than the men from Ichaboe were on board. Again they fortified themselves against months of exile with cases of liquor and luxurious fare from the steward's store. Milo found a small safe in the captain's cabin. It was locked, but he levered it out, rigged blocks and tackle, and carried it back in triumph to the island. The Heraclides had been on the South American run. When they dynamited the safe they found two Argentine centavos.

For many years Milo kept pigs on Ichaboe. There was plenty of pigswill from the galley, and his best pig reached 751 pounds, live weight.

Ichaboe is an odd spot for pig farming, but Milo made it pay from the start. His export trade in pigs began when a fisherman offered to sell them for him in Luderitz – a settlement which, at that time, was living out of tins and bottles. Next time the fisherman called, Milo received £10, a case of rum and a case of beer. After that Milo sent to Cape Town for bags of acorns, fattened some magnificent pigs, and took them to Luderitz himself. He was getting £20 a pig to add to his pay of £6 a month.

“I used to sail to Luderitz in the whale-boat – a safe run as long as you keep an eye on the weather,” remarked Milo. “Once I sailed back, inside the reefs, in two hours and twenty minutes. I must have been mad. It’s thirty miles from Luderitz to Ichaboe,

and I nearly sailed that whale-boat under.”

As a rule Milo had a high regard for the safety of his men. In the early days when there was a Sailing-ship waiting off Ichaboe to load two thousand tons of guano for England, the master would often fret if his cargo was delayed. “A man’s life is worth more than a bag of guano,” Milo would say; and the guano had to wait until the surf went down.

Milo’s reputation as a boatman still survives on the islands. No other man (except Jack Gove perhaps) could handle the steering-oar and take a loaded whale-boat through the rocky channels and the surf with such skill.

As headman, Milo was also the island doctor. This is an aspect of lonely island life which has always made me

wonder; and I can only tell you that a special Providence seems to watch over people in remote places. Men have met violent deaths on the islands often enough, and others who have died there would probably have passed away at just about the same time in a hospital ward. I cross-examined Milo about his medical knowledge, and here is his reply.

“I had a very fine doctor’s book from a ship – a thick book that told you everything,” declared Milo. “I stewed over that book when anything went wrong. One day a coloured boy was humping bags of guano down to the boats when his right shoulder went out of the socket. His whole arm turned round and hung useless. It was the coaster Ingerid we were loading, and Captain Edwards sent for me and said: ‘That arm must go back quickly or

inflammation will set in.’ So I looked up the book and found everything – even a photograph of a man with a dislocation. Then I was ready. I gave the boy a brandy and put him flat on his back with two men holding him down. I sat down beside him, stuck my heel under his shoulder and took his hand. I pulled steadily, just as it said in the book, and as I pulled I canted the arm a bit. That was what it said in the book. I am a good weight and strong, too. The arm gave a ‘cluck’ and it was back. ‘I am all right, baas, I am all right,’ shouted the coloured boy. ‘Thank God for that,’ I said, and sent him back to Cape Town in the Ingerid.”

Milo might have had serious trouble in the “Spanish influenza” epidemic that swept the world in 1918. He knew nothing of the epidemic, but when he

sailed down to Luderitz that year a man on the jetty warned him. "Thirty people have died," said the man. "The church and the school are full of sick people." Milo cast off and sailed back to Ichaboe. Not a man on the island went down with influenza. "Until I was sixty I never had a day's illness," said Milo.

But they went short of fresh meat in 1918. Milo talked a lot about meat. They tired of tinned food and fish and biscuits that had to be knocked on the table to get the weevils out. Fresh meat was a luxury. On rare and memorable occasions Milo would spy an ox on the mainland. This would be an ox that had escaped from the butcher's yard at Luderitz and wandered up the coast. It was a great day for all hands on the island when Milo shot an ox.

After the diamond discovery, of course, the mainland was put "out of bounds" for the island men. I asked Milo how they liked being confined to the island after the years when they had been allowed to hunt and roam in the coastal desert. His old face lit up. "That was just the time when we rowed across more often to the mainland," he confided. And not another word would he say on this entrancing subject.

On the last evening at Ichaboe I lingered with Milo beside the island graveyard. The birds were coming in from the sea, flight after enormous flight, those on the nests greeting the homing birds.

So there was the great choir of avian voices behind us as we stood on the eastern shore and gazed at the crosses

above the men Milo had known. Gannets flew over us in thousands and the penguins rode the cold surf.

In the graveyard lay the century-old bones of sailormen knifed in the crazy, bloodthirsty rush for guano. There, too, rested the dead who had worked under Milo and looted ships, pulled the flat booms and whale-boats, joined in Saturday night sing-songs and slept in the island huts – the men who had died within living memory. Milo knew the story of every wooden cross and headstone.

“That one,” he would say. “Captain of a schooner. Jammed his thumb in a cabin door – got sepsis and died on the island. Just finished loading when it happened, and nothing could save him.”

Milo stood for a long time before a small marble headstone, and I copied the inscription:

*In Memory Of
JOHN GOVE
Born July 31, 1824
Died Oct. 2, 1893*

“It’s queer,” said Milo. “I knew that man – and he came here nearly a hundred years ago, just after the rush.”

“A hundred years on Ichaboe,” I said, shivering a little in the evening breeze.

“Ay, first Jack Gove and then me,” went on Milo, with a wistful note in his voice I had not heard before. “He stayed with Black Sophie when he was in town. Once he brought a crowd of Americans here from a ship called the Alabama – a man-o’-war, so they say, but it was before my time. A rare old

character was Jack Gove, and I can tell you a yarn about him.”

We sat on a rock above the breeding flats, and still the white gannets eddied and circled and screamed, crowding the air and covering the land. Milo neither heard nor saw them.

“A rare old character was Jack Gove,” he repeated. “He had a few side-lines, like I had the pigs and other things. Jack Gove traded sealskins and feathers on his own account, and one day the skipper of an American schooner asked him: ‘Aint you got anything else to trade?’

“Jack thought for a bit and then he said: ‘Captain, I got two men I can let you have – George the Greek from Smyrna and Jimmy Green from Halifax. They died some time ago, but

they’re as good as new. Here they are, packed in a tin-lined box.’

“The American skipper took one look at them and closed the deal for a case of Hollands gin and a box of cheroots. They made short work of the gin, and the island went back to the usual quiet life. Jack Gove never told his men how he got the gin, though – they thought George the Greek and Jimmy Green were safely buried, and they might not have liked it.

“At that time there was an Irish-American working on Ichaboe, Dominick Macaffrey by name. He came from New York, and after a good season’s sealing he told Jack Gove he was going back home for keeps. ‘You’ll come back, Dominick,’ said Jack Gove, and sure enough he did. In fact, Dominick Macaffrey was

still here when I took over the island, and he told the yarn.

“It seems that Macaffrey made for the Bowery when he got back home. He had a few drinks one night, and then he saw a dime museum with a big sign outside: ‘Found at Thebes, Egypt, Two Pharaoh’s Mummies.’ Well, you can guess the rest. The soil here at Ichaboe preserves a man wonderfully – not like the dried, shrivelled Egyptian mummies. So there was Macaffrey face to face with two men he had played cards and drunk with on Ichaboe – George the Greek and Jimmy Green. He recognized his old messmates and rushed out of the place.

It gave him the shock of his life.”

Milo and I looked at the little tombstone of the man who had put through such a fantastic deal, and Milo

shook his head. “A fine sailor man and a good chap, Jack Gove,” he went on, “ but he had no respect for the dead. There was no proper graveyard in those days. After a gale the coffins would show up on the surface, and Jack would prowls round there lifting up the lids and talking to the dead men. ‘Good morning,’ Jack would say. ‘You still here, eh? Well, you got a darn sight better shirt than mine. I’ve got a good mind to take it off you.’ Once he found a head with red hair, and he walked into the bunkhouse swinging it. They cleared out pretty quick, I tell you. That was Jack Gove all over. He gave Black Sophie one of the Ichaboe mummies, and he sold lots of them in the old days.

“When he felt that his own time was coming he wanted to make sure he would be left undisturbed. So he

ordered that tombstone. You see, he was a lonely man all his life on this island – but he wanted to be remembered. He paid the captain of the Sea Bird all his savings, £75, and made him promise to set up that tombstone.”

I could not help wondering whether such a small marble tombstone could possibly have cost £75. Nevertheless, Jack Gove wanted to be remembered and if he was cheated over the tombstone I will not cheat him now.

When I was going through the guano island records in the Cape Archives, turning over pages of reports and logbooks that no one had touched since last century, I almost heard Jack Gove’s voice. You can recreate a lot of the past if you go deep enough – even the career of an obscure, lonely,

hard-case Scot who died on Ichaboe long ago.

“I was in the schooner Adventure belonging to de Wolf of Liverpool,” Jack Gove told the captain of a man-o’-war, H.M.S. Sylvia, which called at Ichaboe in 1885. “Soon after the guano rush I came here for de Pass, and I have been here ever since. There were very few birds, particularly penguins, when I arrived. I had to nurse this island, and I have seen the birds grow threefold. It was all right again by 1860, but since then a lot of gannet died from some disease. Not one young bird was left on the island that season.

“When Captain Jones of the Furious took possession of the island, I was put in charge of the Union Jack. I remember the disputes before that. Often the birds were disturbed. I

believe that landing on an island before the birds have laid their eggs will drive them away. Penguins are not easily worried, but the cormorants are very shy and the gannet next. Penguins scrape up sand, which spoils the guano, so we put up fences and try to keep them on the rocks. There is a great migration to the north early in April and the birds return about the end of July. For three months the island is almost empty.”

That was Jack Gove’s life for more than forty years, watching the birds, scraping up the guano. Then came that October day in 1893. The schooner Sea Bird was sealing from Ichaboe that day, at the rock called Eighty Four in Boat Bay. When the hunters were loading the pelts into the whaler they realized that one man, John Solomon, was missing. They found him on the

west side of the rock; he died from heart failure. Sealing is not the game for a man with a weak heart. The schooner sailed back to Ichaboe with her flag at half-mast.

When she anchored off Ichaboe the island flag was at half-mast too. Jack Gove’s long exile was over.

Chapter 8

THE ISLAND THAT SHAKES

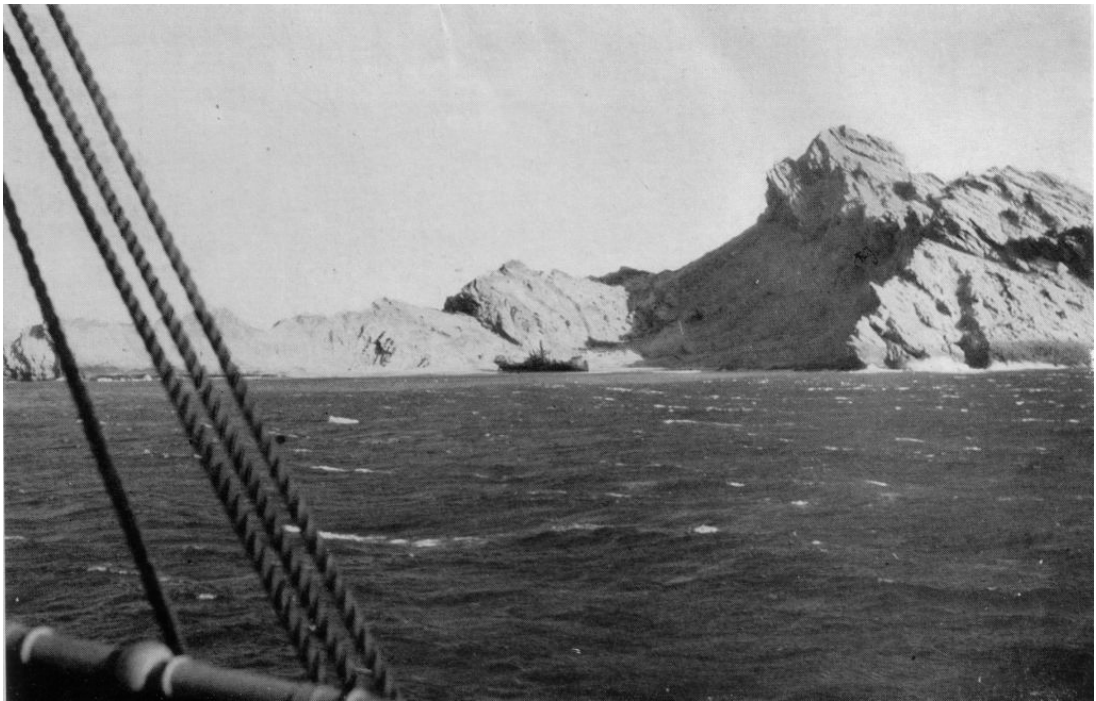
IT IS only an afternoon's run in the Gamtoos from Ichaboe to Mercury – an afternoon spent watching the lonely coast, a typical stretch of the “Coast of Dead Ned”. But the approach to Mercury is the most dramatic of the whole voyage.

Mercifully the weather is clear. Every landmark brings memories of the diamond prospectors who plodded along these desert beaches, past Saddle Hill (a huge saddle of sand), past miles of cliffs until Dolphin Head looms up like a small Rock of Gibraltar. This is the southern point of Spencer Bay, as barren and gloomy a curve as you will find even on this shore.

One mile from Dolphin Head, almost in the centre of the bay, stands Mercury Island – a sharp white pyramid with a cave on the seaward side. Bare rock with the birds crying over it, a rock 130 feet high and no more than a quarter of a mile in length. Not a sign of human life until the Gamtoos comes in by the south channel.

“I’ve a great respect for this place,” Captain Finlayson tells me as the ship rounds up slowly towards the anchorage. “There’s plenty of wind here in March, but not so much sea. Poor shelter at the best of times. I’ve had to clear out in the middle of the night when the anchor dragged, and drop the hook outside in twenty fathoms. The rollers ... you can get rollers here.”

He looked over his shoulder and I followed his glance. There on a little beach, framed between cliffs and



There on a little beach, framed between cliffs and overshadowed by Dolphin Head, was a coasting steamer. She was the Otavi, she was there for keeps.

overshadowed by Dolphin Head, was a coasting-steamer. High and dry, she was, though every large sea creamed round her bow and stern. She was the Otavi, she was there for keeps with a cargo of guano – a ship that cleared out at night and failed to make the open sea.

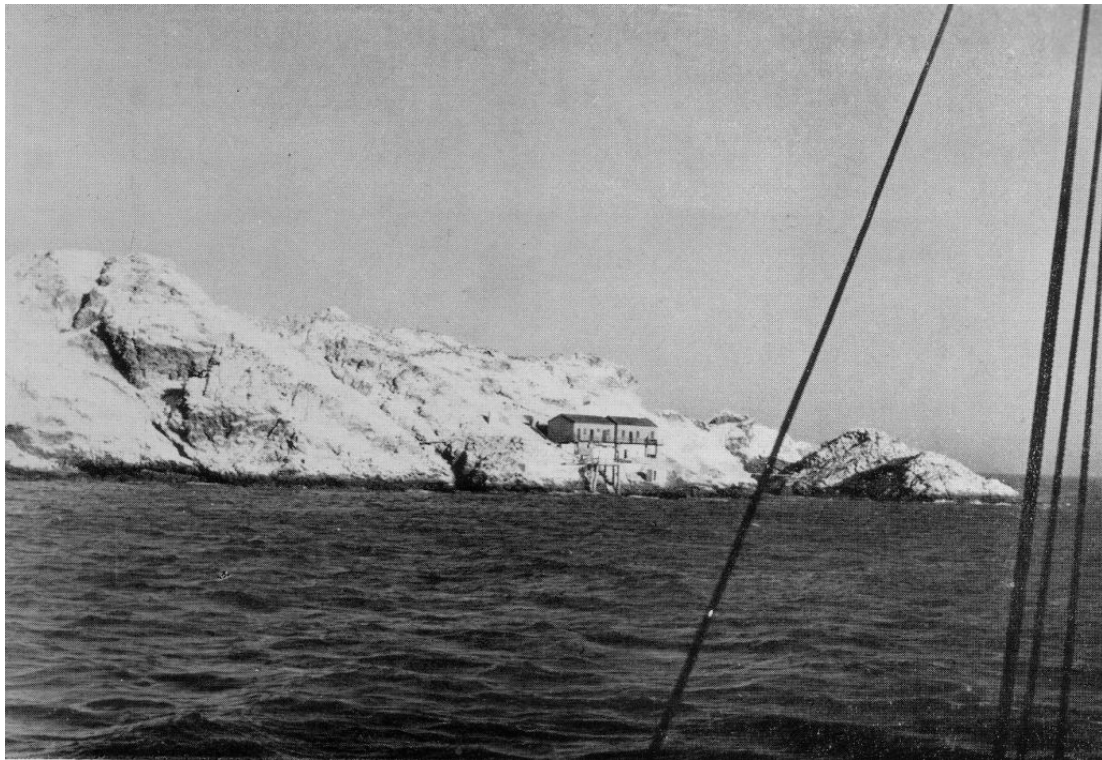
Against the white rock of Mercury I saw two grey wooden houses built on concrete pillars. The flag was flying and there were men on the balcony. This was the place, I remembered suddenly, where one man after another had gone mad – in the old days and in our own times. One glance at Mercury is enough to explain all the tragedies. This is the weirdest rock of the lot, a place to visit but not place where I should care to linger.

No one is going on shore tonight, so I am sitting in my cabin reading Captain

Benjamin Morrell again. Here, well over a century ago, he took a thousand seals; his crew risked their lives that day, and Ogden, one of his best men, was drowned. Nothing daunted Morrell for long; but a later shipmaster formed a grim impression of the island.

“It is impossible to conceive anything more wild and dreary than this isolated spot,” wrote the shipmaster. “Nothing but the hope of great profits could ever induce men to imprison themselves in so wretched a dungeon; a sentence of transportation could certainly not be more severe and more penal than the banishment and confinement the guano gatherers impose upon themselves.”

I never heard of a Mercury Island exile making “great profits,” and today it is difficult to persuade the coloured



This was the place, I remembered suddenly, where one man after another had gone mad ... One glance at Mercury is enough to explain all the tragedies.

labourers to work on this island. Three of them have been here before; the rest are young novices who must be wondering why they agreed to be marooned on Mercury this season.

Before dawn I heard a rumbling up for'ard, and knew the Gamtoos had let go a second anchor. I went to sleep again, but Captain Finlayson never sleeps at Mercury.

If I had known how difficult the landing on Mercury would be I would not have slept so well. You go in with the flat boom, watched by those in the Gamtoos and the men on shore. Near the high jetty which overhangs the sea, the flat boom's crew pick up a warp and ship their oars. They haul the boat under the jetty and you see a thick rope dangling from a beam far above. Riding high on an incoming swell, the boat comes level with a cement

platform beneath the jetty. This is my moment. I have to stand on a seat, grasp the rope, and swing across to the concrete with all hands shouting to make sure that I do not change my mind. So I swing, and the island men seize me, and a moment later the boat I have left far below is backing away from the rocks. Breathless but relieved, I am safely on Mercury.

My first steady glimpse of the island is an inscription painted on a flat rock: "C. Abrahams, died 2d July 1890." Reminders of death are all too prominent on these islands. Mister Milo, who has swung on shore in the meantime without any fuss, points up the steep face of Mercury to a queer, man-made barricade of stones and cement.

"That's the island graveyard," says Milo solemnly. "It's different from

Ichaboe here – there’s no soil to bury a man, so they just cement the coffin to the rock and put stones round it. A queer place to die, eh?”

Headman de Wet took us into his wooden house. His wife was expecting a baby, and I thought Mercury Island was a queer place for a pregnant woman. They have two rooms and Mrs de Wet cooks over a paraffin stove in the living-room. This is a contrast with the other islands where, for more than ten years, the headmen and their families have had solid houses with large kitchens.

Mercury Island, of course, is not meant for married couples, or anyone but the birds and seals. I was told that one young island assistant after another had refused promotion to headman when he heard that the vacancy was on Mercury Island.

You can go for a climb on Mercury, but walking is limited to the veranda, thirty feet in length, outside the huts. That is the only flat space on the island. Two island assistants have their bunks in a room next door to the headman; and in the other hut is the galley and the bunk-room for the labourers. Below the huts are the white cement store-rooms and water-tanks.

Civilization has not gone much further. Walls, bridges and hand-rails have been placed here and there; but as I climbed about Mercury I was always discovering heights that made me dizzy. From the moment of landing I felt insecure. Off the northern end is an islet, so close that the surging water has been bridged by a plank. They scrape North Islet, as they call this rock, and my companion crossed the plank to examine the guano.



They scrape North Islet, as they call this rock,
and my companion crossed the plank to
examine the guano.

Cormorants were nesting on the plank, and both ways he had to run the gauntlet of sharp beaks. He returned with his legs bleeding. I thought the vicious birds would make him lose his balance and fall into the rugged gully fifteen feet below. He explained his escape in these words: "I decided that my only hope was to ignore the birds – but it was not easy."

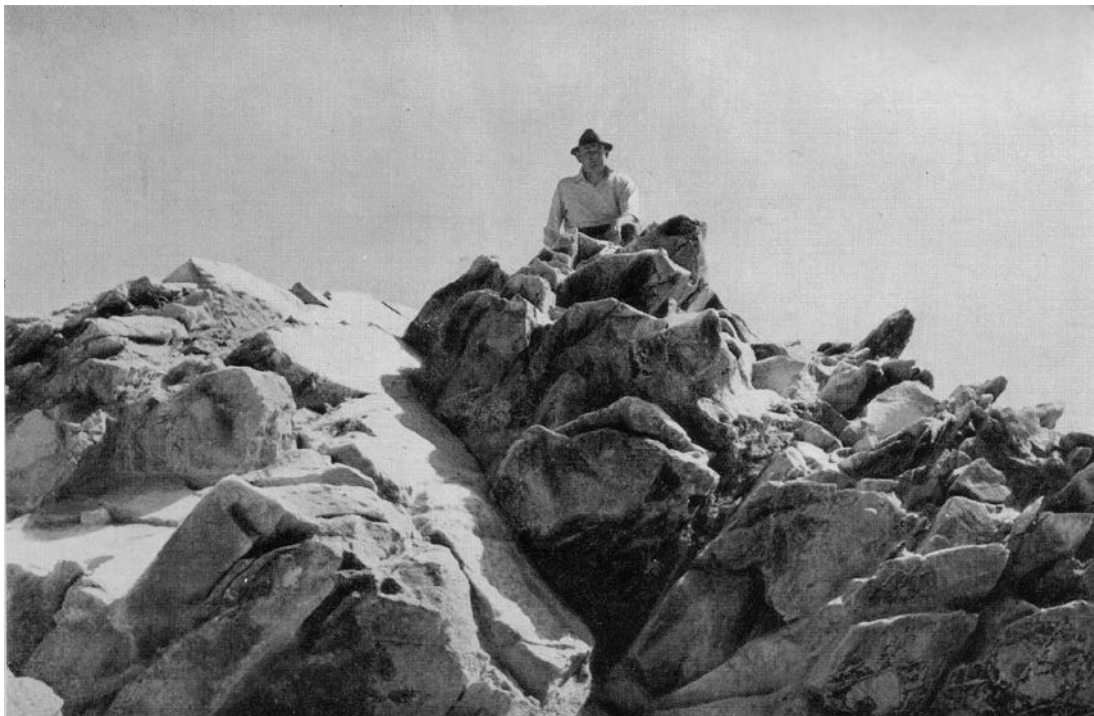
Then we climbed to the summit of Mercury, to the famous "Glory Hole" which still affects my stomach when I think of it. This is a natural funnel going down into the east to west cave. You can hear the waves rushing into the cavern far below. In the old days more than one man lost his footing on the slippery guano, fell into the "Glory Hole" and was never seen again. So now they have placed iron bars across the death-trap to give a measure of

security. On many parts of the rock the labourers work roped together like mountaineers. That is why only young men are sent to Mercury. It is steep, gruesome and dangerous.

Some forgotten shipmaster, a whaling skipper maybe, revealed a touch of genius when he named Mercury Island. That whole great lump of rock shakes like quicksilver whenever the sea comes up from the south-west and dashes into the cavern. Headman de Wet demonstrated the curiosity for my benefit. He placed a glass of water, filled to the brim, on the table. Along came a huge comber, thundering into the cavern, and the water spilled over the brim of the glass. In a full gale the wooden huts shake on their cement foundation as though in the grip of an earthquake.

The cave in the seaward face of Mercury is 150 feet high. Crashing seas have eaten their way right through Mercury; they come out through a small tunnel on the landward side. How long will it be before the hollow, quivering island collapses into the cavern? It is inevitable. I have seen other sea caves along this coast, and in some the erosion of centuries has ended in immense falls of rock. Mercury Island cannot go on shaking for ever. This century or next, or centuries hence, Mercury Island will become a heap of rubble instead of a pyramid.

Among the weird sounds on Mercury when a gale is raging is the rumbling of stones in the narrow part of the exit tunnel. Out of the dark mouth near the huts comes the typical reverberation known to the island men as “the bells



The author on the summit of Mercury Island, where labourers work roped together like mountaineers.

of St. Mary's". Eerie music – but Mercury is an eerie place.

My friend David Wilson, the prospector, called at Mercury during his official search for diamonds. He had a look at the cave from a boat, but wisely decided that the weather would have to be dead calm before he would dare to venture into the recesses. The ship left before his chance came. Nevertheless I met one man who pulled in boldly at low tide on a day when there was not a ripple on the water.

"Inside that sea cave it was blue as the grotto of Capri," the explorer told me. "The quartz rock hangs in fantastic shapes after centuries of hammering by the sea – pillars and archways, vaulted halls and craggy buttresses. Near the edge of the water I saw masses of pebbles among the seaweed

and driftwood. There might have been diamonds – but the tide was rising and I dared not stay."

One labourer murdered another coloured man on Mercury some years ago. Just a sudden quarrel over a game of cards after months of isolation, and there was the victim bleeding to death in the grey hut. The murderer went out into the darkness and was not seen again. There is a legend that he hid in the tunnel and that a friend supplied him with food and water; then he swam across to the mainland, crossed the desert and escaped; and certainly the murderer had a reputation as a swimmer. I shall never hear the truth of that story.

Some headmen survive Mercury, others do not. When David Wilson was there the headman was the only white man on the island. He had gone

queer, and Wilson's ship took him off. On the way down the coast the headman threw his sea-chest overboard and tried to jump after it.

Mister Milo remembered another headman on Mercury, a Portuguese, who became so depressed that the coloured labourers decided it would not be safe for him to remain on the island. They landed him on the mainland and sent one man to walk with the demented Portuguese, south down the coast to Ichaboe. The Portuguese gave no trouble in the desert, and the water and food lasted out. Milo saw the two men signalling and fetched them across to Ichaboe. That night there was a singsong, and the Portuguese seemed happy again. After a few days, however, the Portuguese became violent.

"I had to lock up the knives and spades, and put on men to watch him, day and night," recalled Milo. "He was with me for a month. I was so worried that I sent a messenger overland to Luderitz with a note. The doctor sent me some pills and a white powder. I gave him a couple of pills in his tea at night, and he would go off to sleep. He was a strong man, a good oarsman, and I was afraid of what he might do. It's a bad thing to have a lunatic on the islands.

"Then the steamer came to load guano – the old Ingerid – and I handed him over to Captain Jensfeld. First thing the Portuguese did was to walk into the galley and grab a steak out of the pan. Some fool gave him a glass of brandy, and that made him worse. He climbed the funnel and gave more

trouble than a monkey. I was glad to see the last of that Portuguese.”

I met a headman who had spent four years of his life on Mercury Island – two years at a stretch, then a holiday in Cape Town, then another two years. All that time he was the only white man. Once in three months the cutter from Luderitz arrived with meat, green vegetables and letters – and cleared off again before he could read his letters and write replies. He is married now, headman of an island much closer to civilization. But he often thinks of those four lonely years on Mercury. “Was it bad?” I asked him.

“Well, I was saving money and I made the best of it,” he said. “But it was bad once – when I opened my letters after the cutter had gone and learnt that my mother had died.”

Mercury Island was the scene of one of Captain John Spence’s escapades in the lawless days last century before Germany claimed the mainland.

The Hereros were at war with the Hottentots, and for months the schooners Sea Bird and Lilla had been carrying guns and gunpowder, lead for bullets, percussion caps and cartridges by the ton. Hottentots trekked down to Angra Pequena with oxen – ten or twelve oxen for a single-barrelled gun, double the value in Cape Town of those old-fashioned fowling-pieces., No doubt the gun-runners would have supplied both sides, but the Herero territory was further north and Britain had taken possession of Walvis Bay, the northern harbour.

As the war went on, mission stations were burned and the wagons of white

traders were looted. So after a long delay the Cape Government prohibited the export of guns to “no-man’s-land” – and sent up a British gunboat to see that the order was obeyed.

Captain Spence defied the edict. The captain of the gunboat swore that he would hang Spence if he caught him with contraband on board the Sea Bird – and he had a noose ready at the yard-arm.

Somewhere off Angra Pequena the gunboat sighted the Sea Bird standing in towards the bay. Spence saw the gunboat, too, and steered north with a long start and a hard sou’-wester to help him. The gunboat lost touch with the fast schooner in fog; and Spence ran in behind Mercury and landed his guns on the island. He was away to sea again before the gunboat overhauled him and fired a shot across the Sea

Bird’s bows. The marines came aboard and searched the schooner, but they had to let her go. Spence sailed back to Mercury when the gunboat was hull down, picked up his cargo, landed it near Pomona.

Up to the end of last century they had another name for Dolphin Head, the headland where the Otavi now lies stranded on the little sandy beach. They called it “Spence’s Bluff”.

Every time I look across at the Otavi I think of the drama that followed the wreck. Masts and funnel are standing; she looks snug on that beach under the cliffs, as though she might still be floated off. In fact, she is finished.

It was the last trip of the 1945 season. By the time she had loaded at Mercury, the Otavi had five hundred tons of guano on board (valued at

£5,000) and 150 coloured labourers. She had also taken the headman and his wife and son off the island. Mr. Louis Fourie was the island inspector at that time and Captain Sigrid Nielsen was in command of the ship.

They had planned to leave Mercury at night and arrive off Ichaboe at daybreak; so Captain Nielsen got his anchor up at 2.45 a.m. and moved out in a moderate fog, relying on his compass. Eighteen minutes later something dark loomed up ahead. "Hard a-starboard – full speed astern!" Too late. The ship was aground under those barren cliffs.

"I was sound asleep when a sea smashed in at my port-hole," Louis Fourie told me. "Things looked black when I got on deck, and seas were breaking over the weather side. Both starboard lifeboats had been carried

away, and seas were sweeping round bow and stern and meeting amidships on the lee side. It was useless trying to launch our remaining lifeboats, so we waited for daylight."

Daylight revealed the Otavi in the little sandy cove where she still lies. Nielsen and Fourie (an experienced ship's officer before he became inspector) held a consultation and decided to land the labourers and some of the crew on the beach. After that they hoped to get all hands back to the huts on Mercury Island.

"I knew it would be dangerous to remain in the ship at that time of year," went on Fourie. "So two flat booms were launched and I went ashore with the first batch of labourers, taking a hawser and anchor. We then returned to the ship and landed the headman and his wife and

child. The rest of the day was spent landing fresh water and provisions, and tarpaulin shelters were rigged. The cook made supper, but it was a cold and depressing night on the beach.”

Next day three men were sent to walk down the desert coast and report the wreck. Some of the castaways were on the main beach at Spencer Bay, others in the sandy cove near the wreck. After four days they were encouraged by the sight of a South African Air Force bomber circling the island, and guessed that the three men had got through the desert safely.

Tugs arrived, including the powerful Cape Town harbour tug John X. Merriman. The headman and his family had been landed on Mercury Island; but most of the ship’s company had spent ten days on the dismal beach when the John X. Merriman passed a

tow-rope and made the first effort to salve the Otavi. Every day the flat booms had been taking risks in the surf, landing food and water, ferrying some of the labourers to the waiting tugs.

The tugs failed. Captain H. C. van Delden, the leading salvage expert in South Africa, came up later with pumps and gear on a “no cure, no pay” agreement. He moved the Otavi into deep water; it seemed that the ship was coming back to life. But the hammer-blows of the sea on her broadside were too much for her. The tank-top was opening and closing with every sea that rolled under the keel. The ship had no strength and she was doomed. At sunset the salvage party abandoned the Otavi and left her in that sandy cove, with the valuable salvage gear still on her decks.

Among the castaways was a young island assistant named Jackie de Wet, who always carried a feather bed to ensure his comfort. He saved his bed from the Otavi, and lent it to the headman's wife. All hands remember the cold nights on the beach at Spencer Bay. The wind swept down on them from Dolphin Head, and not far from their camp-fires the jackals howled.

Not the least dramatic episode during that strenuous period was the walk for help. Headman on Ichaboe island at that time was Mr. Aleck Fourie, a man who had spent sixteen years on the islands. He realized that the Otavi was overdue, kept a sharp look-out, and saw the three messengers arrive on the beach opposite his island. Fortunately the sea was calm, and he was able to reach them without delay. They had trudged through the heavy sand for

more than thirty miles, and they were exhausted. Aleck Fourie set out alone to complete the journey to Luderitz.

"I thought I could cover the thirty miles to Luderitz in five hours, and foolishly I started off without water," recalled Aleck Fourie. "If I had walked down that coast before I would have known better. It was an ordeal. I passed a hut at Anachab, the abandoned German police post, and they told me afterwards that there was a food and water depot there for emergencies. I knew nothing about it.

"My legs had almost given in when I reached the crawfish factory outside Luderitz late that night. My tongue was beginning to swell. I found a Hottentot night-watchman making coffee in a tin. I drank the Hottentot's coffee, and it was the finest drink I ever had in my life."

Aleck Fourie is now skipper of the Pikkewyn, the 100-ton motor-cutter based on Luderitz which serves the northern islands between the visits of the Gamtoos. He takes the seal hunters on their rounds every year; and he knows every reef and anchorage from Hollam's Bird to Sinclair's Island. Aleck Fourie has been in many tight corners with the Pikkewyn. He knows that if the sea comes up and he is caught inside the breakers at certain sealing rocks, he and his ship will be on the beach. That does not worry him at all, but he shudders when he thinks of the Otavi.

He has a souvenir of that adventure, a silver cigarette case presented to him by a director of the Thesen Line, owners of the ill-fated Otavi. Often when he lights a cigarette he thinks of his walk from Ichaboe to Luderitz,

when he forgot to carry water. It was his most desperate experience on the "Coast of Dead Ned".

"I ran for miles," Aleck Fourie confessed to me. "I had to get the idea of dying of thirst out of my head."

No one lost his life in the Otavi wreck. There should be no ghosts on board the little abandoned coaster in the sandy cove opposite Mercury Island. Yet the coloured labourers on Mercury swear that the wreck is haunted. On certain nights, they say, the lights come on again in the port-holes.

No one died after the Otavi wreck, but many have died in Spencer Bay since Morrell lost his best sailor sealing on Mercury. I can imagine a ghostly party of bygone seamen, prospectors, guano men, adventurers all, sitting round in the Otavi's sodden saloon and

drinking a toast.
Ned!”

“Here’s to Dead

Chapter 9

COAST OF DEAD NED

EVIDENTLY THE “Coast of Dead Ned” is running in my mind tonight, or I would not be imagining ghosts on board the Otavi. I have known this coast for so long, tramped over its dunes, sailed into its precarious bays; it has become so familiar after many years that I can see every curve of it from the Orange River to Walvis Bay. And its people, too, the living and the dead.

Spencer Bay, where the Gamtoos is lying tonight, is one of those places where the air trembles over an expanse of yellow sand and scattered stone. The sort of place where a stranded airman would find himself licking the dew from the wings. Where one despairing man might remark to his companion: “We have a revolver.”

I have been fortunate, and never have I found this coast unfriendly. Always it has given me the escape I have sought; something more than freedom from the cities. This coast takes me back, often centuries back. It gives me not only the freedom of its long beaches – too long for many who have walked upon them – but also a time freedom. You can find anything on these beaches, anything from the relics of primitive man to the wreckage of a lost aircraft.

You can find primitive man himself. Not long ago I was talking to high officials of this vast country behind the desert coast. They had been travelling in the Namib far to the north of this bay, visiting the remnants of a Hottentot clan living round an oasis. The chief of the Hottentots asked the officials whether they would like to

meet certain queer people who were under his protection; and the officials agreed and waited.

Five little human beings arrived, somewhat nervously, at the oasis. They had never seen white men before. They were dark-skinned and as small as Bushmen, their hair was matted, and they carried bows and arrows. The officials learnt that there were about fifty in the tribe; but the others were collecting shellfish on the coast.

It was a sensational meeting, for not one of the officials had ever seen natives like these in the territory. The late Major C. H. L. Hahn, the most experienced native commissioner in South-West Africa, soon solved the riddle.

These people were Strandlopers, a race thought to be extinct. They tallied exactly with details given by Colonel Robert Gordon in 1779 – people only five feet in height with sparkling eyes and haggard faces. Strandlopers roamed this coast long before the Bushmen, leaving kitchen middens and stone implements for learned archaeologists to puzzle over. And here were the Strandlopers in the flesh, the very last of them. I wish that I could have seen them myself; but it was Colonel P. I. Hoogenhout, Administrator of South-West Africa, who described the meeting to me. The little men played reed flutes for him. “It was not music as we know it,” said Colonel Hoogenhout. “The flutes gave imitations of the sounds of nature, like the wind.”

Dead Ned's diamonds are guarded by the surf that beats upon the long beaches all the way from the Orange River to the Kunene. Inland there are the dunes and the thirst belt. Yet in recent years, since prospecting was forbidden, there have been many daring raids on the Coast of Dead Ned.

To understand the dangers encountered by diamond poachers who sailed up this coast in small craft you must study the charts again. South of the Kunene (which marks the frontier between Angola and South-West Africa) there is a stretch of about four hundred miles where the chart is based on a "running survey". The old British and German gunboats which carried out this work were unable to land shore parties or set up beacons. In 1879, H.M.S. Swallow reported "no harbours, no places at which landing

may be effected in ordinary weather, and only temporary anchorages". Overland expeditions have visited points on this coast, but much of it remains unexplored.

It is a forbidding coast, with its high dunes and heavy breakers. As there are no settlements, shipwrecked crews have endured great hardships; and some, indeed, have perished from thirst after coming safely through the surf. Prospectors have found rotting lifeboats with the skulls and bones of white men in the sand.

One expedition discovered an abandoned cart, still packed with prospecting gear. Tattered papers in a leather case revealed that the party had set out from Swakopmund before the First World War. "We found the cart in a dead desert, black as the mouth of hell," said a member of the expedition,

“Of the men who had accompanied it there was no trace.”

The whole territory inland from this coast, known as the Kaokoveld, has been closed to visitors since 1929, and permits to enter are seldom granted. A high official in South-West Africa told me the reason. There are native reserves in the north, and the government wished to cut off the primitive tribesmen from undesirables such as liquor smugglers and gun-runners. They also hoped to prevent the spread of cattle diseases.

This simple explanation was not accepted by the suspicious people of South-West Africa. It was rumoured that a new Kimberly had been located in the unexplored territory. Soon afterwards the long war started with raiders in yachts or fishing boats and

the camel police as the opposing forces.

One of the toughest diamond raiders I ever met was Skipper Charles Broker, owner of the ex-naval pinnace Theodora. Under fifty feet overall, and narrow-gutted, the Theodora sailed thousands of miles in all weathers with Broker at the helm.

Naval pinnaces are built for harbour work rather than deep-sea voyages. It takes a sailor to handle a little ship like the Theodora in a gale offshore, and Broker was a sailor. After years in square-rigged ships he found a job on the railways in South Africa; but when he retired at the age of sixty he returned to the sea – in the shape of the Theodora.

By the time Broker had rigged the pinnace as a ketch and equipped her

with a motor she had cost him £1,000. However, the Theodora became his home. Sometimes he went out fishing. One season he took on the contract for carrying penguin eggs from Dassen Island to Cape Town. Most of the time he spent under an awning in the Theodora's cockpit, smoking and reading. He paid no taxes at the docks, and he told me it was the ideal life for a pensioner with seafaring tastes. "I like to think I can sail away to any part of the world whenever I fancy a change," remarked Broker. "This packet of mine is a double-skinned teak boat, able to stand up to any weather. Yes, she is a bit narrow-gutted – but with her length she can ride nicely on the crests of two seas. Of course you have to know how to handle her."

In 1931 the Theodora caught the eyes of a syndicate of diamond hunters. They said that they knew where a treacle-tin containing diamonds worth £58,000 had been hidden on the "Coast of Dead Ned", and they supplied Broker with the latitude and longitude of their treasure. Broker's chart showed the spot slightly to the north of the Uniab River in the Kaokoveld.

"I am the only man who has landed a crew on that coast and brought them away alive," declared Broker. "The Admiralty sailing directions state that landing is at all times impossible owing to the dangerous breakers. My advice to future expeditions is to follow that advice. Several of my crew were nearly drowned attempting it."

Before the Theodora left Table Bay news of her mission reached the

police. Broker knew that his movements were being watched. He announced that he was bound for the rich fishing grounds of Portuguese West Africa – and this was his intention. He investigated fishing possibilities in those waters before sailing back to South Africa.

Engine trouble delayed the north-bound *Theodora* for a few days at Saldanha. At sea again, Broker found the strain of handling the little ship telling on him. The six diamond prospectors were useless as deck-hands – they had never been afloat before, and the *Theodora* gave them a rough baptism. The mate was inexperienced, and Broker had to steer for watch after watch in heavy weather without relief. Sometimes he found shelter in the lee of the guano islands; but often he was forced to anchor off the open coast

while he slept. Most of his meals he scooped out of a pannikin with one hand while he steered with the other.

“We passed the Orange River and kept close inshore,” went on Broker. “Fogs and errors on the charts have caused many wrecks on this desert coast – you see the broken hulls in the surf like black milestones against the long glaring yellow beaches. There are few ports of call, and anyway we were not anxious to arouse suspicion. When my passengers had recovered from seasickness they began to suffer from a sort of scurvy. Our fresh food was finished.

“At last we reached the spot the prospectors had marked on my chart. On shore a great fire was blazing. Afterwards I learned that an aeroplane had been sent to search for us, and that

a police patrol was waiting for the Theodora on the coast.

“I had carried out my contract by bringing the men to the spot, and I did not wish to land. There was a heavy surf running, but I told them what to do – let go a kedge anchor outside the line of surf, wait for a chance and run in to the beach paying out cable. Two of the men loaded the dinghy with provisions and water, rowed off, and, being landsmen, made a mess of it. The boat swamped and landed on the beach with all the water and provisions lost. They suffered a great deal from thirst, and at night the cold was intense. The police were some distance away, and had not yet appeared; so that the men were able to search for the treacle-tin of diamonds. It was somewhere in a crevice on Fort Rock Point, and they soon realized

that it might take days to locate the exact spot.

“After a time I was able to send a raft ashore with food and water and two more men. Soon all six of them were there – what they did I do not know. The police found them and told them that they were under arrest, but that it would be impossible to take them back overland. It seems that the policemen and their camels had nearly died of thirst on the way to the coast. My passengers managed to launch the dinghy and return to the ship after five days with a note from the police ordering me to return to Walvis Bay.

“Meanwhile, the prevailing wind from the south-west had blown up fresh, and I decided that there was nothing to do but to run before it for Mossamedes. I could not risk a shortage of fresh water. The gale was so

violent that I had to heave-to under double-reefed jib and mizzen for five days and nights, drifting slowly northwards all the time. Once I tried to sail her, and nearly drove her under. The prospectors thought the ship was sinking.

“When the weather moderated I sailed on past the Kunene River and sighted a fine new steamer ashore. I could not see her name, but I should have liked to have gone alongside to examine her. With a good crew I could have done it – but it was impossible with that crowd.

“The Portuguese officials at Mossamedes treated us well, helped us in every possible way to refit the Theodora for the return passage. I had intended to sail for Table Bay direct; but while at sea a mysterious leak developed. At last I found that my

galvanized iron rudder tube had set up chemical action with the brass rudder. The tube was eaten away, and I had to put in at Luderitz.

“There I was fined £40 for landing the men in a prohibited area. The rest of them had had enough of the Theodora – they returned overland. I picked up a crew and came back to my home port. A yachting cruise, you might call it. The Theodora will look like a yacht when I have hauled her up on the slip and painted her. She’ll last my lifetime. I am going fishing now. No more diamonds for me.”

Three years later the 21-ton yacht Our Boy, owned by Mr. J. Guzzwell, tied up alongside the Theodora in Table Bay docks. She had just made a leisurely cruise of eight thousand miles from England. Guzzwell and Broker became friends ... and the story

of Dead Ned's diamonds was told again.

Broker put Guzzwell in touch with two members of the party who had landed at Fort Rock Point. This time the raid was planned with complete secrecy. The yacht *Our Boy*, a much more comfortable ship than the *Theodora*, sailed out of Table Bay with clearance papers for the lonely island of Tristan da Cunha. It looked fair, square and above-board – an ordinary yachting cruise.

Our Boy, of course, never went anywhere near Tristan. Eleven days sailing brought her to Fort Rock Point. There she lay rolling in the swell for nearly a fortnight before a boat could be launched. Then the two men who knew the cache took a chance and shot through the surf.

They never returned to the yacht. Once they shot a seal on the beach for food; and scaled tins of water and food were floated on shore to them. After three weeks at Fort Rock Point it was clear that the two men on shore would have to walk back to civilization. Walk they did, and they were arrested at the first police outpost and fined heavily. But they never gave Guzzwell away. Guzzwell sailed back to Table Bay and announced that he had been to Tristan. His log-book supported the story. Soon afterwards he sailed back to England.

“And the diamonds?” I asked Broker.

“Someone had got in ahead of Guzzwell,” replied Broker. “I believe it was done by aeroplane. Anyway, the treacle-tin was there in the crevice all right – but it was empty.”

Broker spent the rest of his life peacefully on board his beloved Theodora. One morning in 1947, when some friends called on him, they found that he had died in his sleep.

Hundreds of claims were pegged round Spencer Bay in the early days of the diamond rush. Mr. David Wilson, who prospected the islands, spent a year on the shores of Spencer Bay sifting this fine sand.

He told me the story of the galleon in the desert. One of his Hottentots went out to collect fire-wood and returned in great excitement saying that he had found enough wood to last for ever. It was true. Projecting from an enormous dune was the carved oak stern of a galleon, black with age.

Diamonds forgotten, they tried to shovel the sand away in the hope of finding treasure. Then came a sand-storm, and they raced for shelter. When the storm had passed, the old ship was covered again; and they realized that it would take an army to dig that galleon out of its sandy grave.

Some of the crescent-shaped dunes, the notorious “barchan” dunes, are six hundred feet high. They march with the south-west wind, and what they have covered the wind will lay bare again one day. But do not linger beside the buried galleon. On this coast a full water-bottle is worth more than any other treasure. There is guano on the coast as well as the islands – “white gold”, remember, if only you can find it and transport it away. Dave Wilson once found a sea-cave filled with thousands of tons of guano. From

the beach at Easter Cliffs he saw penguins swimming into the face of a cliff at high tide; and when they did not return he knew there must be a cave.

Wilson waited for low tide. He was after diamonds, ready to take risks; and even at low tide the current was strong. He struggled naked into the cave and smelt guano. The quills of dead penguins cut his feet, and fleas attacked his body. Nevertheless he pegged his claim, for guano ranks as a mineral on this coast, and before he left he estimated that there were four thousand tons of guano to be lifted. That was the problem. The cave was well over a hundred miles from civilization. There was no way of taking it out, through the surf, over the rocks, and down the desert coast. "I thought I had a fortune," said Wilson. "There is

a fortune in that cave for the man who solves the transport problem."

North of Easter Cliffs is a lagoon, ten miles long, in a world of sand called Sandwich Harbour. This was another of Benjamin Morrell's old haunts, and he reported that there was not a finer place on the whole coast for taking fish in nets, "fat and delicate flavoured as any salmon".

De Pass and Spence, the guano people, were fishing at Sandwich Harbour as far back as 1859. Captain Spence found the lagoon alive with sharks, and shipped two hundred tons of oil in one year. The fish was worth £3,000 a year in those days, and the enterprise went on for a long time. They sent shark liver oil from there to the Paris Exhibition of 1867, and won a prize. They caught one man-eater thirty feet

in length which yielded two hundred gallons of oil. Then the sharks vanished.

This is a capricious coast. Diamond-fields that seem to offer inexhaustible fortunes are worked out. Other forms of wealth present themselves only to disappear. You must cash in while you can, and look elsewhere. That is the way de Pass and Spence became rich; they sent a schooner to explore the whole coast as far as Angola, made their own private chart, and kept their secrets to themselves.

I had an early glimpse of the "Coast of Dead Ned" in a diary I found by chance in Cape Town. It was kept by Mr. T. E. Eden, a London surgeon with a knowledge of geology, one of the first scientists to visit the islands and the coast and leave a record of his

work. That diary revealed a forgotten page of history, and I was fortunate in laying hands on it.

While the last of the guano was being shipped away from Ichaboe, rumours reached England that nitrates, another great fertilizer, were to be found on the South-West African coast. Nitrates had been discovered on the rainless west coast of South America, near the guano islands. Why not in South-West Africa, where the conditions were identical? It looked as though the rush might start all over again, and Eden was engaged by a Liverpool firm to investigate the reports.

Eden sailed in the fast barque Jessie (573 tons) in February 1845, and sighted Albatross Rock and the barren coastal hills after seventy-eight days. Thirteen ships were loading at Possession when the Jessie anchored there.

Eden analysed these cargoes and found that much of the so-called guano consisted of the decayed seals that had baffled Morrell. In one ship's hold he was shown a human mummy which was being taken to England for exhibition. There were also a number of mummified penguins, much in demand by shopkeepers who liked to put them in their windows.

The captain of a brig at Possession showed Eden a few crystals of impure nitrate of soda, and declared they had come from the neighbourhood of Wall's Island (now Pomona Island) only a few miles from the sea. There was a race to the spot "for fortune and success" in which Eden took part. He had an uncomfortable time in the long boat, slept miserably on a sand hill and returned without even a sample.

The islands at that period heard many wild rumours. Another skipper gave Eden a fine sample of copper, with instructions for reaching the spot. Again Eden found no trace.

He was also allowed to study a chart of an island called Gallovidia, said to exist near Ichaboe and covered with hundreds of thousands of tons of guano. Some captains walked forty miles along the desert coast in search of it; for the fabulous island was said to lie so close inshore that it could be reached on foot at low tide. Their thirsty walk was in vain.

One hopeful master of a schooner took home many tons of "gold dust". It turned out to be yellow mica.

Eden met Hottentots at several places along the coast. The natives had learned a little English from the guano

men, and Eden was greeted with shouts of: “How do? How do? jacket! trouser!” He found the Hottentots “harmless, inoffensive, gay and lively”. The antelope were so unaccustomed to the presence of man that they took no notice of the sound of Eden’s musket. He visited the water-hole used by the Hottentots. The tracks of many animals led to it. Eden found the water almost salt, but the Hottentots were carrying it away in leather bags. They had no other supply.

It is easy to be wise after the event, but one wonders how observant he really was when he records that he collected many samples of pebbles – banded ironstone, green epidote, jasper, chalcedony, garnets and quartz. These are the pebbles found in association with diamonds, and Eden was

wandering in a great diamond area; yet there is no mention of diamonds in his diary – only the pebbles. Like Morrell, he was looking for something else. Morrell found his seals and overlooked the importance of the guano. Eden was searching for nitre and missed the diamonds. It seems that the prospector should cultivate an open mind. All that Eden took back to his ship was a bag of worthless pebbles and some insects. I wish that I could have a day on shore in the same area now, with a prospector’s licence.

During this shore excursion Eden met Hottentots who cried: “Bacca! Bacca!” They were smoking fine dried grass of an emerald colour, but they vastly preferred Eden’s tobacco. Their pipes were shaped like cigars, and were ornamented and made of a mottled green mineral of the magnesium

family. Some wore copper earrings. One carried a piece of wood bored with a number of holes. By moving a string from hole to hole, the man knew how many days he had been away from his tribe.

Eight ships were scraping up the remnants of the guano at Ichaboe on May 28, when the Jessie arrived there. It was an anti-climax after the drama of the-huge fleet which had sailed off, laden with wealth, leaving these eight ships like hungry cats round an empty garbage can.

On the mainland near Ichaboe, on a beach to the south, Eden came upon thirty smashed boats and the wreckage of several ships lost during the November gale the year before. The men of the Jessie busied themselves removing copper bolts from the

wreckage. That was the only valuable mineral the expedition yielded.

After three months on the coast Eden came to the conclusion that the samples of nitrates which had reached England had come from some other area. He noted in his diary: "One person said he had picked up crystals of nitrate of potash on the coast opposite Possession Island. A chemist valued it at £24 a ton. This man was signed on as supercargo with a liberal salary and commission and sent back to South-West Africa. On arrival he declared that the place where he had found the potash had entirely altered since his previous visit. His lot happening to be to carry the grog bottle, he fell down from drunkenness and mortification, broke the bottle, and said that he had sprained his ankle and could proceed no further. Had it not

been for the humanity of the captain he would have been left behind. Apparently his motive was that he had nothing to lose and might gain. He had to ship before the mast on the return to England.”

Human nature does not change much, and many another field has been “salted” since those days. Eden, however, felt that he had taken part in a wild-goose chase, and wrote bitterly in his diary: “Some persons had the effrontery to present to eminent firms in London and Liverpool large and beautiful crystals of nitrate of potash, which they declared by the most solemn assertions had been procured by them from the South-West Coast of Africa. But with gross falsehood there has also been much ignorance, and it would appear that the ammoniacal salts found in guano had been

mistaken for nitrate of soda. Tempted by such flattering appearances, many firms of great prudence and respectability have speculated intensively, for the information spoke of millions of tons. I have only examined the coast, never more than six to eight miles from the sea. Many parts which have not been visited at all may abound in minerals of great value. Even nitre may exist at no very great distance from the sea.”

Eden, and many others after him, walked over the rich diamond-fields and possibly kicked up diamonds without recognizing them. It is a way this coast has. Some of the lucky ones found wealth simply because there was no thought of wealth in their minds. As for the unlucky ones, the old name tells the whole story. “Dead Ned ... Dead Ned ... Dead Ned.” You

do not have to walk far over the dunes
before the words ring in your mind
like a warning bell.

Chapter 10

WORLD OF BIRDS

SO FAR you have had no more than an occasional glimpse of the wonder of the isles – the birds that produce the “white gold”. If you have never bothered to study a bird in your life before, these sea-birds will turn you into an amateur naturalist. I am a little worried about the penguin – the Cape Blackfooted or jackass penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*), the only member of the species found in African waters. It does not take a zoologist to discover that this humorous little creature is on the way out. Though the Cape penguin may still be counted in millions, it is passing along the road to extinction almost as surely as the Great Auk of the northern hemisphere.

You can trace this tragedy in many ways. Ichaboe was a penguin strong-

hold when the guano rush was on; today there is a tiny penguin colony on the summit of the island. These pathetic survivors are tolerated by the gannet millions only when they keep to their own narrow pathway from the sea to their burrows. The penguins are like a little band of aristocrats in evening dress, suffered to live on in a corner of an estate which was once thickly populated by their vanished ancestors.

Up and down this coast you find other islands where the penguin has been conquered by the fierce gannet. I know one island (at Lambert Bay) where photographs were taken early this century of breeding flats covered with penguins, and with not a gannet in sight. Today no penguin ever visits that island. It is a gannet city.



Though the Cape penguin may still be counted in millions, it is passing along the road to extinction almost as surely as the Great Auk of the Northern hemisphere.

This dwindling of the penguins hits me in the stomach, for I know no finer breakfast than a penguin egg boiled for twenty minutes and served with butter, pepper and salt. I have enjoyed that dish in Cape Town since I was a child; but in recent times I have seen it disappear for years at a stretch.

Twenty years ago they were collecting half a million penguin eggs a year on the islands, selling them to an eager South African public, even shipping a few to epicures in New York and London. Ten years ago the total of eggs collected had fallen to 213,000, six years ago it had dropped to almost half that figure, and now they dare not collect the eggs at all. Only the people of the islands can savour the matchless green jelly and rich yolk of the exquisite penguin egg. And with the perverseness of human beings, the

island families much prefer to open a tin of bully beef.

Flightless birds have a hard time of it in the ruthless world of nature, and I suppose it is for this reason that the penguin is following the Great Auk and the dodo. Yet I found this passage in the notes of a naturalist who observed the penguin on the South African coast a century ago: "Penguins often invade islands occupied by gannets. They come in from the sea in vast numbers, skirmish round the island until their leaders have found the most suitable landing-place, and then advance in wedge-formation. The organized horde fights viciously, inch by inch. They fight on until they drop. These tactics are nearly always successful, and the gannets forsake their nests and are put to flight."

Well, the flightless penguin is not winning any battles nowadays. He still enjoys a few sanctuaries; but on many of his old homes he is a dejected survivor of better days, treated as a leper by other birds. Probably the twilight of the penguin began more than a century ago on Ichaboe, when a Cape Town poet wrote these prophetic words:

*Tormented for aye be the pitiless
breast
That drove me afar from my home!
A desolate bird o'er the broad
billow's breast,
In search of a country to roam.*

*Fiends ever torture the cold
ruthless heart
That robbed my warm nest of its
young!*

*And made a poor heart-broken
penguin depart
From the land whence his fore-
fathers sprung.*

These penguins of African seas were the first penguins ever seen by white people. Diego Cam recorded observing them when he landed at Cape Cross to set up his stone monument. There were never any penguins (as we know them) in the Arctic though the Great Auk looked something like a penguin and may possibly have been a distant relative. The slow-moving, flightless Great Auk or Garefowl was first named penguin; and when vaguely similar flightless birds were discovered in the southern hemisphere the same name was given to them.

Portuguese explorers often restocked their provision lockers with salted penguins. One early navigator wrote:

“The birds were as big as ducks, but they cannot fly because they have no feathers on their wings, so our crew killed as many as they chose.” It is a fact that the penguin has no quill feathers, and it is the only bird in the world with this peculiarity. The flippers, however, are covered with scale-like feathers.

Peter Kolben, a German astronomer who worked at the Cape early in the eighteenth century, was the first to write of the southern penguins under that name. “There is a sort of sea-bird about the Cape, a name for which I have not been able to meet with in authors,” he remarked. “The Europeans at the Cape call them Pinguinen, a name which I fancy was given them on account of their being generally very fat.”

It is fortunate that nearly all the guano islands were out of reach of the Hottentots, or the penguin might have become extinct even before the Portuguese explorers arrived. The Hottentots never made boats, or even rafts. One island off the Namaqualand coast (Elephant Rock or Morrell’s Island) was within their reach at exceptionally low tide and for centuries a whole tribe preyed on the seals and penguins there. Much further north the beachcombing Hottentots, Bushmen and Strandlopers were able to land at intervals on Pomona Island. When they did so, not a penguin remained alive.

But the white man is responsible for the doom of the penguin. Robben Island, six miles out in Table Bay, was a penguin island when the Dutch settled at the Cape three centuries ago.

The diary of van Riebeeck, the first governor, is full of references to visits to Robben Island on penguin-hunting expeditions. It was not long before the penguins abandoned the island in disgust.

Some of the early travellers thought that the penguins formed a link between the birds and the fish. Ludicrous on land, the penguin rivals the most graceful fish once it has entered the water. It can cover a hundred miles a day. Sometimes it cruises up the west coast as far as Angola, or eastwards to Durban; but it is a lover of the south, and only in zoos north of the equator will you find the penguin.

Whence came these birds that bray like jackasses and swim with their wings? Bob Rand, the zoologist of the islands, tells me that the Antarctic ice-

cap will have to be blasted off by atomic bombs, and all the fossil remains studied, before it will be possible to trace the evolution of the penguin.

Penguins may have originated in the Arctic and spread to the Antarctic. Ages ago, when the South Polar continent was a green and temperate land, penguins flew over the mountains. Then came the ice-age; apart from the seals the animals of Antarctica perished; and the penguins no longer found flying necessary to escape from their enemies. Always fish-eaters, they began to spend more time in the water than in the air. Colder and colder became the water; fatter and fatter grew the penguins to withstand the freezing seas. And slowly the wings changed to flippers. The penguin had come down to sea-level for good.

Once upon a time there were Antarctic penguins as tall as a man. Down south the penguin is still an enormous fellow, up to four feet in height, with gorgeous orange feathers on his neck. This is the emperor penguin. Only a little lower in the scale is the king penguin, found on sub-antarctic islands – an aristocrat with a gold collar, often three feet tall, running upright instead of hopping like some of his smaller brethren.

There are nearly a score of penguin species in the south, but few indeed have ventured as far north as South African waters. I should like to welcome an emperor penguin to one of our islands, but this is too much to expect. On rare occasions, however, macaroni and rock hopper penguins have been recorded on these shores. ‘

Nearest breeding places of macaroni and rock hopper penguins are Prince Edward and Marion islands in the Southern Ocean, while rock hoppers also breed on the Tristan da Cunha group in the South Atlantic. Thus the penguin of one of these species which visits even the southern tip of Africa must embark on an ocean voyage of thirteen hundred to fifteen hundred miles.

Large numbers of dead macaroni penguins were found at Cape Point in 1828. Forty years later one macaroni was captured alive in Table Bay. It had the typical long, curly crest with golden-orange feathers.

Rock hopper penguins are more frequent callers, though they are rare enough. This species has a red or orange beak and pale yellow plumes which give the impression of comical,

exaggerated eyebrows. You can tell a rock hopper from its habit of hopping on land with both feet together. Other penguins waddle. Rock hoppers have been recorded in South Africa on five occasions during the past century and a half. The last arrival was found on a beach near East London in 1947, sick and moulting; but it soon recovered in captivity.

Such immigrants are gay birds in comparison with the black and white jackass penguins of the guano islands. However, the jackass species sometimes produces albinos. All sorts of animal oddities were collected from many parts of South Africa for a display at the time of the opening of the first Union Parliament in Cape Town in 1911; and Dr. Peringuey of the South African Museum received an albino penguin from Dassen Island.

Shortly before the display this ghostly rarity wandered out of the museum grounds and was found by a schoolboy in a square in the centre of the city. The kindly boy carried the albino back to the sea and released it. After that episode the islands were combed for albinos and four more were found and sent to King George V – an unusual compliment.

Albinos have a bad time on the islands. The late Cherry Kearton, famous Antarctic photographer, once spent six months filming the Dassen Island penguins; and he observed an albino from the day of its birth. It was pecked and cuffed on land, pursued and bullied in the water. Such unhappy freaks are better off in zoos.

Normal jackass penguins display black markings on the centre of the forehead and crown and the sides of the face.

Their backs are black, too, and so are the flippers, though these have narrow white margins. The white breast has a black horseshoe band. Tails are short. At the base of the stout black bill there is a pink spot. The jackass seldom grows above twenty-seven inches in height; but it is considerably larger than the Galapagos penguin and those found in Australian and New Zealand waters.

Penguins, according to many zoologists, are the most interesting and the most popular of all birds. The psychologist might add that it is because they have something human about them – like monkeys. Authors of many nations have studied the penguin; and it is an odd but significant fact that a French writer, for example, has described penguins as funny little Frenchmen while other observers have

seen their own national characteristics in the behaviour of the same birds. Independent scientists now agree, however, that the penguin is not as intelligent as earlier writers led us to believe. Experiments and close observation have proved that the penguin is slow-witted in adapting itself to new conditions, its memory is faulty and power of discrimination by no means brilliant.

Nevertheless, the penguin cities of the guano islands make a picture of comings and goings, of activities and emotions, which I find more absorbing than a hive of bees. Penguins do not pack themselves as tightly as the gannets; yet you must tread with care as you enter the rookery. Everywhere there are bayonets held against you – beak after sharp beak menacing your ankles as you pass, striking out

savagely and painfully the moment you come within range. Scores of heads turn as you move, for the penguin's eyes are fixed. Scores of bodies shake with rage at the sight of the invader. For a small bird the penguin puts up a marvellous display of anger, accompanied by a hissing worthy of a cobra.

You can see every stage of the penguin life-cycle at any time of the year on the islands. While the great majority conform with two annual breeding seasons, there are always many stragglers or eccentrics whose instincts are ahead or behind Nature's schedule.

January is the month when courtship begins, and the penguins are seen in the most absurd attitudes of ecstasy. They bray with pleasure and the mated females lay their eggs. If the eggs are

left undisturbed, the normal clutch is two; but if, you remove one egg at a time, the penguin will go on laying up to twenty in a season. The nest is a burrow on Possession and other islands where there is soil; but on the rocky islets the penguins content themselves with pebbles, seaweed and sticks, Bob Rand's instruments, or Dave Wilson's boots.

Penguin colonies are full of eggs in February, with each parent bird sitting on the nest for days at a stretch – a hungry business – while the mate roams the ocean and stores up enough nourishment for the spell of duty ahead. When the chicks appear in March, the parents put in shorter periods at sea, and usually return each day to disgorge half-digested fish for their young. This is one of the sights of penguin city – the dark-brown,

downy chick pushing its tiny head far into the parent's gullet in the effort to obtain oily sustenance. After a few weeks the growing, loutish chick is seen in grey plumage, stronger and greedier now and demanding its food with unseemly vigour. By the end of June the young penguins are in the sea and fishing for themselves, much to the relief of the harassed parents. In August the cycle starts again.

Adult penguins are seen at their worst from November to February. Multitudes go through the post-nuptial moult which lasts for about six weeks and robs them of all appetite. They stand forlornly on the breeding flats pictures of ragged misery, making as little effort as possible, and secretly envying the happy birds in full, unruffled, black and white plumage.

Penguins occupy the same nests year after year. They follow the same paths to the water century after century; so that on the rocky islands you can find grooves in the surface of boulders worn by countless millions of flat black penguin feet. When in haste they will toboggan down a slope. On level ground a hurrying penguin often falls on his white belly. They are always stumbling with flippers akimbo, always suffering some loss of dignity until they enter the friendly sea.

At once the penguin displays the poetry of motion. Watch him in the shallows and he gives the impression of flying under water. He has been timed beneath the surface, six minutes without breathing. And he has a most amusing trick of working up to his top speed of twenty miles an hour and then shooting clear of the water on to a

chosen rock – a marvellous feat of timing combined with judgment of distance.

Penguins sleep on the ocean and they can spend six months at sea without the slightest discomfort. Their eyes are shielded by a thin film, their ears are waterproofed with oil. At the side of the throat is a pouch which can be filled with water so that the penguin can dive like a submarine. Most of the time at sea, the penguin's enemies are swimming at lower levels; so that the white belly is really a protective colouring which the prowling shark or octopus fails to observe. The penguin is armoured against cold by the tightly-packed, oily feathers. It is clear that the ocean has become the only home where he is really happy.

So it is no wonder that the penguin on shore is a figure of fun with his

dejected stance and awkward movements. Among the penguins there is always something to watch; and though the same behaviour is repeated endlessly the impression left on the onlooker is one of infinite variety.

Very soon you learn that penguins make impeccable husbands, wives and parents. Any headman will tell you that a male penguin which has lost its consort will never mate again; and on the edge of every rookery there is always a group of bereaved males, living apart and never casting a glance at passing females. Male courting penguins bring pebbles in their beaks and drop them at the feet of their fancies. If one pebble fails to please, another is offered. Once accepted, the male starts burrowing with his powerful feet. This may end up as a tunnel or a mere depression, according

to the soil. When it is finished the mated pair make an emotional picture of married bliss, rubbing beaks, stretching necks and embracing with their flippers. I must add that the spectacle of an angry husband beating his wife with his flipper is not unknown on the islands.

When the eggs arrive, there is the ceremony of relieving the nest – as solemn and stately as the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. A penguin sentry, male or female, is an aggressive guardian; and you need a long stick if you intend to rob the burrow of eggs.

Then the chicks with yearning beaks, and the touching scene when the parents teach the chicks not to wander into hostile camps or the perilous outer marches of the rookery where the marauding gulls are waiting. Finally

comes the day when the chicks are herded into the shallows and taught to swim. It does not take a penguin chick long to overcome the fear of water.

All these chapters in the penguin life-story and many more go to make up the fascination of a rookery. You see penguins lifting their flippers as though trying to fly, proof that the instinct still lives thousands of years after the power has been lost. Penguins nibbling at their feathers like monkeys after vermin. Penguin husbands roaming peevishly after missing wives. Piebald, moulting penguins growing thinner by the day because the loose feathers prevent them from diving after fish. Penguins fighting with flippers and beaks, and drawing blood. There is the evening rush when thousands upon thousands of penguins come bobbing in from the sea and

make for their burrows, tired as city workers, and as eager to meet their mates. Some give up the arduous, rolling flat-footed progress and move along faster on feet and flippers. In the rookery you can distinguish friends and enemies, families and solitaires, figures in a Lilliputian world.

Wherever there are heights on these islands, there you will find penguins. They climb with great difficulty, and I have no doubt that they choose such places to avoid the seals. Milo told me that on Sinclair's Island he had watched herds of startled seals going through the penguin rookeries like steam-rollers, breaking the eggs and flattening every penguin in their path. Heavy seas often rolled up birds and nests, and though the parent birds survived the young ones did not. They

have walls round most of the islands nowadays to prevent such tragedies.

But the penguins look after themselves when they can by nesting in high places. Albatross Rock to the south of Possession is a volcanic rock shared by seals and penguins; and on the long ridge far above the sea you find the penguin eggs. It was the same on Mercury, where I climbed from ledge to ledge until I could look down the seaward side. I was surrounded by penguins up there, and attacked when I tried to move downwards through their ranks – the only possible route. I do not take kindly to heights, as I have said before, and this was a disturbing interlude. There was time to reflect that in a life which had not been without queer experiences I could not remember anything similar; and thus no inspiration came from the adventu-

rous past to guide me. Finally I went down noisily and nervously, escaping without a stab.

As I rested on a lower ledge I saw a duel between penguins at the same level. The weaker bird was thrust downwards, and fell helplessly from ledge to ledge, bumping painfully, until it was caught by a projection far below. I thought the bird was dead or fatally injured. Instead, it clambered painfully back to its adversary and resumed the fight.

On this island penguins are found cheek by jowl (or flipper to wing-tip) with gannets and cormorants. This is a strange mixture, due entirely to lack of space. Even on over-crowded Ichaboe the few penguins nest apart from the gannets. Mercury is like a block of flats in which all classes and races,

black and white, are jumbled together, layer upon layer.

And all the time the penguins are giving way slowly to stronger birds or mightier and mysterious forces. Somehow the balance of Nature has been upset. It cannot be the gulls, though they are hastening the end that will come centuries hence. At the moment I believe the odds are still slightly in favour of a penguin couple hatching their eggs. If you watch the crafty gulls at work you will realize how narrow is the margin.

Gulls lurk along the fringes of the breeding flats. The ranks of the gannets are so firm that the gulls can seldom carry out their commando raids; but there are always gaps in a penguin rookery. Gulls work in pairs, one beating its wings as a challenge to lure the brave penguin sentry away

from the burrow, the other ready to dash in and disembowel the chicks or steal an egg. All too often the trick succeeds. Then you see the gull poised above the nearest rock, allowing the egg to fall and break, and fluttering down to scoop up the ill-gotten nourishment.

Another bird which preys on the penguin in just the same way is the sacred ibis, a distant relative of the stork. This species, once common along the Nile and deified by the Egyptians, is found in most parts of Africa and nests among the cormorants on the guano islands. Headmen would like to shoot the ibis at sight, but cannot often do so for fear of disturbing the other birds. There is no honour among thieves, and gulls will snatch the eggs of the ibis. Strange to say, the ibis puts up no fight at all on

such occasions. It is unfortunate that there are never enough ibis eggs to satisfy the appetites of the gulls.

So the admirable, hard-working, lovable penguin has to suffer and I have to go without my penguin eggs. In the old days, penguin eggs were the perquisites of the captains who brought the guano from the islands. At the end of last century Captain Alfred Murton of the Sea Bird landed one shipment in Cape Town which he sold for £300 to a Malay dealer known as Coffee; and Coffee passed them on to the public at the very fair price of one penny each.

Last time I tasted penguin eggs they were rock hopper eggs, collected on Inaccessible Island in the Tristan group. A fishing expedition collected 20,000 eggs, put them in the refrigerated hold with the cargo of crawfish

tails, and brought them 1,500 miles to Cape Town. I had to pay ten shillings for a dozen rock hopper eggs, a steep rise in price compared with old Coffee's penny eggs. Something is happening to the jackass penguin, and I will go without my eggs more cheerfully if this warning leads to more effective protection of the vanishing species.

If the penguin is the most entertaining of the guano island birds, the gannet is by far the most beautiful. Every year the homing gannets provide the lonely headmen with the supreme avian event of the island world – the sudden vision of their mass return.

Some time in March, as a rule, the gannets, young and old, depart from the South-West African islands for their unknown destinations in the

north. Towards the end of June there will not be a gannet on the islands. Just wait, on Ichaboe for preference, and watch the transformation.

As the winter sun goes down you will hear the penguins braying, but the wide breeding flats of the gannets will be empty. During the dark hours will come a sound that will fill the air and cut off the penguin noise-such a beating of wings that you will awake and marvel. Go out at dawn, and you will see a white island, alive with gannets from end to end, alive and shimmering with millions upon millions of birds.

And still they come, always from the north, cloud after cloud, in such numbers that they black out the rising sun. They may have been scattered over the wide South Atlantic, but their timing is faultless and within twenty-

four hours they will have taken full possession of their old homes on every island where they roost. I mean this in the individual sense, too, for it has been proved by “ringing” that mated birds return to exactly the same spot year after year.

There they settle, packed wing to wing, always quarrelling but seldom fighting as the penguins do. There in July and August you will see the elaborate courtship, the bowing and arching of long necks, the bill-scissoring and beak-lifting displays. Then the egg-laying, one white egg in each saucer of soil and seaweed; rarely two eggs.

For six weeks the parent gannets take turns in incubating the egg in their own remarkable manner – covering the egg with their large webbed feet. At the end of September millions of

naked chicks appear. They grow fast, the gannet chicks, white at first, later with plumage of speckled grey. By November the clumsy chicks are as large as adults. They are well-fed with half-digested fish disgorged by their parents; and the chicks, clinging to the nests, thus deposit the main part of the guano crop. Day by day the nests rise higher as the droppings form new grey-white layers.

Early in January the chicks begin to exercise their wings. They cannot fly, but they “taxi” over the breeding flats like young air pupils who are not yet ready to go solo. At this stage the parents desert their young – a deliberate and kindly desertion which is the only way of telling the chick that in future it must fly and fish for itself. And so it does, though it may have to

live on its fat for a month before the first awkward flight is achieved.

Like large modern aircraft, the gannet needs a long runway to take off successfully. It is a heavy bird, with its seven-pound, cigar-shaped body; though you would expect a wingspan of six feet to provide enough lift. Nevertheless, the gannet prefers to launch itself from a high jetty if there is one handy. Young birds use the low walls that have been built round the islands; and at first they crash so regularly that you wonder how they have the nerve to try again. On the ground, a young and overfed gannet lumbers about like an air-liner moving up to a hangar. Only when it loses some of its fat does the hungry young bird succeed in rising and fluttering away from the land to the feeding grounds offshore.

Sula capensis, the Cape gannet of these guano islands, is a close relative of *Sula bassana*, the North Atlantic gannet or “solan goose” of Canadian cliffs and the remote rocks of the British Isles. It is a little smaller than this “solan goose” that went to the table of the Kings of Scotland, and it has black on the pointed tail. At a distance it would be hard to tell northern and southern gannets apart.

Both have handsome yellow heads with powder-blue beaks and cold blue eyes; long, narrow black-tipped wings and body feathers of dazzling white. Both are protected by air-sacs round the neck and chest so that their “dive-bombing” methods of hunting fish do them no harm, though they strike the water like thunderbolts.

That was one of the sights of the islands I never tired of watching. The



Sula capensis, the Cape gannet of these guano islands, is a close relative of *Sula bassana*, the North Atlantic gannet.

gannets go out on patrol at heights up to 150 feet, searching the sea for their favourite diet of pilchards. Over the shoal they wheel, each gannet marking its fish. Then down they plunge like kingfishers, wings still outspread, so that you wonder whether the hurtling birds will survive the impact. The folding of the wings is almost too swift to follow; but slow-motion films have proved that the wings are clasped round the body at the exact moment of entering the water. The sensational dive aids the gannet in reaching its prey quickly, and the speed is so great that the fish is nearly always taken by surprise.

Once the gannet has a fish in its beak the wings come into play as brakes, and the fish is usually swallowed before the gannet breaks surface. Gannets have their rivals. High diving

is poor sport if the reward is snatched away by a gull before it can be enjoyed. Fishermen often watch the gannets and hurry to the spot knowing that the shoals will be there. When they run short of bait, some fishermen play a wicked trick on the gannets. They paint a board the colour of the sea, fasten a fish to it and trail it astern. The gannet dives to sudden death.

Gannets are many times more plentiful on the guano islands than they are in the North Atlantic colonies. An accurate census taken in 1939 revealed a total of 165,000 breeding gannets and 70,000 young birds on British islands, the Faeroes, Iceland, Newfoundland and the islets of the St. Lawrence River. In the south, Ichaboe alone has often seen 20,000,000

gannets, and there are millions on other islands.

There is no record of a meeting between the small northern and enormous southern tribes of gannets. The northern species range in winter to Gibraltar, the North African coast and Palestine. Cape gannets have been noted as far north as the Cape Verde islands off West Africa and Zanzibar on the East African coast. They fly far out to sea, but apparently they never cross the gap to mingle with their northern cousins. Bob Rand is carrying out "banding" experiments on the South African islands, however; and one day the mystery of the disappearance of the Cape gannet for more than three months in winter will be solved.

It would also be interesting to know why the gannets prefer Ichaboe when there are wide open spaces on other

islands. Long ago a commission sat in Cape Town to investigate a number of island problems, and the question was put to the master of a guano schooner. This was his reply: "Not being a bird, I cannot tell you why the gannets prefer Ichaboe." I have to leave it at that. Another gannet mystery is the manner in which they locate their own nests and mates among millions of identical birds. You see them screaming in from the sea in the evening, hovering like helicopters and alighting after only slight hesitation on the right spot. Experienced observers tell me that they get their bearings from the general appearance of the immediate neighbourhood of their own nest. Only after alighting, as a rule, do they recognize their mates. There follows the usual neck-rubbing display, both

birds holding their beaks aloft in ecstasy.

Gannet is a name derived from gander, and these birds are the geese of the sea. Sailors called them boobies – they are so easily caught on shore. Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist, who named so many of the world's animals and plants in the eighteenth century, called the northern gannet “*Sula bassana*” because it was found on Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth. On the South African islands the gannet is invariably known as the malgas or malgas local Afrikaans name meaning “mad goose”.

Sula capensis (or *Morus capensis*) is the only South African gannet species. An occasional visitor to the islands, however, is the masked booby (mom-bakkie-malgas in Afrikaans), a tropical species that breeds on Boatswain

Island, Ascension, and strays far to the south. This bird has dark brown wings.

Gannets are members of the pelican family. Pelicans nest on the guano islands, and are heartily disliked by the headmen. It seems that pelican parents are in the habit of offering their chicks young cormorants and gannets to vary the fish diet. So pelican eggs are smashed whenever they are found. Pelicans usually fish in the lagoons of the coast, driving the fish into shallow water by concerted action. But these huge birds also dive like gannets. You can hear the splash of a pelican hitting the water half a mile away.

Most important of all island birds from the standpoint of guano production are the cormorants, also known as shags, but invariably called duikers (the Afrikaans word for diver) in South Africa. The guanay of the Peruvian

islands is also a cormorant, somewhat similar to the white-breasted duiker of the African isles. Dr. R. C. Murphy, the American ornithologist, has selected the guanay as the most valuable bird in the world. As the guanay deposits the bulk of the Peruvian guano crop, valued in millions of dollars every year, the claim is surely justified.

It is the trek-duiker, black all over and sinister at close quarters, which enriches the African islands. Milton described Satan in the shape of a cormorant, and after studying the duikers on their nests I entirely agree with him. Their naked young are revolting. The black plumage of the adult, and its habit of setting its neck writhing like a snake, make it a most unlovely bird. All the guano birds are gluttons, but the duiker seems to

parade its greed more than the others. It eats until it vomits up the fish; then goes on eating.

Scientists in the South African fishing industry loathe the duiker and often plead for its extermination. They say that a duiker eats fully eight times its own weight in fish every day.

I can believe it. Dr. C. von Bonde, the South African director of fisheries research, has stated that it takes 7,000,000 tons of fish to produce the 10,000 tons of guano deposited (in a good year) on all the islands. (On top of this is the sad fact that about ninety-nine per cent of the guano is dropped into the sea.) The duiker is not so plentiful as the gannet, but a rough census not long ago gave a total of 10,000,000 duikers along the west coast. It will be a difficult campaign if

ever the authorities decide to get rid of them.

On the wing, the gregarious trek-duikers are seen in vast cavalcades. They have been observed over Table Mountain (3,550 feet), but as a rule they fly strung out low over the water, with their scouts out in search of small surface fish. They can swallow a fish of one pound weight, or an octopus with ten-inch tentacles – but not with ease. Watching a duiker on the rocks with its food reminds one of a python slowly devouring a buck.

Besides the trek-duiker and white-breasted duiker, there is a species on the islands known as the bank duiker which serves a useful purpose. It fishes on banks sometimes twenty miles out at sea, and fishermen often profit by watching its movements. The reed-duiker, with a longer tail than the

others, also nests on the islands; but this is really a fresh-water bird with a wide distribution on the African continent.

Cormorants of the sea often fly far inland to devour river fish. Farmers who have stocked their dams with trout or black bass shoot the cormorants at sight. “Greedy as a cormorant”, they say, and indeed one of these birds will visit the trout hatcheries and gulp down a hundred young trout in a day. Fishermen on the Cape coast retaliate not only by using cormorants as bait but also by eating them. I draw the line at this dish.

At times the trek-duikers cease to be individualists. Some unexplained instinct draws them together to fish in close formation. Then you see a crescent-shaped host of birds pounding the water with their wings, driving

the shoal inshore until the frightened fish leap out of the water on to the beach. The water boils with trapped fish and feasting birds. And always in the wake of the organized hunters come the gulls.

Within living memory there were more birds on these African guano islands than one finds today. Old headmen like Emilio Barbieri can see it at a glance; and it is proved statistically by the lower guano yields in recent years. The same thing has happened on the Peruvian islands from time to time, and there it has been traced to the veering away of the Humboldt current which brings the fish for the guanay birds.

Along this South-West African coast some other cause must be sought. The fish are there-a huge fishing industry has been built up in recent years, while

the guano production has been falling steadily. One day it may be necessary to abandon these islands to give the birds that absolute non-interference which is essential if they are to resume full-scale breeding activities.

Whatever happens, the gannet and cormorants are in no danger. Epidemics among them are rare. But the poor flightless penguin will need years to recover from the exploitation of a century. Long before this voyage of the Gamtoos I was on the bridge of a coasting-steamer one night with a captain who had spent his life in these waters. "Thirty years ago I used to hear the penguins braying all night at sea along this coast," said the captain. "Now the night is quiet – the penguin is dying out."

All these birds take us through one of Nature's doors to a different and

entrancing world. In many ways it is a more restful world, for there are few problems among the little flippered people or those winged beauties, the gannets. Always there is the pleasure of moving in a secluded and unspoiled world of salt air and seaweed, a timeless world comforting to the troubled human heart. It may be a mistake to spend one's life among sea-birds, but there is no denying that these isles have been isles of escape indeed for many who have been overpowered by the cities.

You cannot have a world of sea-birds without a world of fish. The birds may be roughly estimated in millions, but it is impossible even to guess the immense fish population in the cold waters that run northwards for a thousand miles from Table Bay.

This is certainly one of the richest fishing-grounds in the seven seas, with more than two thousand fishing-craft of all sizes at work. Fishermen land a £4,500,000 catch every year. Seabirds enjoy a £1,000,000 feed every day. Some say that the birds should be driven from the islands in the interests of a half-starved human world that is turning more and more to marine sources of food. Nevertheless I believe there is enough fish for birds and men.

A fisherman from California would be thoroughly at home along this coast just now. He would see American-built motorboats hauling up pilchards identical with the Californian species in Californian purse-nets. At the factories he would notice the Monterey system of unloading fish by suction pump. And in the canning plants he would find American auto-

matic cutting and packing machines. Within a few years the South African pilchard catch is expected to equal that of California.

The pioneer Californian pilchard boat arrived in these waters under her own power in June 1949. She was the 85-footer North Cape, and she did the run of 9,400 miles from San Pedro in 104 days. On board the North Cape was the largest fishing-net ever seen on the South African coast, a purse-seine capable of taking a hundred tons of fish in one haul.

This is just history repeating itself, the return of American enterprise to South African waters after sixty years. For it was in 1889 that the American schooner Alice arrived at the Cape and started making enormous hauls of fish in a purse-net. Captain T. A. Chase of the Alice had his daughter on board as

navigator. He opened up trade in salt mackerel, shipping his casks at a time when supplies in New York were low. It was a successful venture; much too successful, for the Cape fishermen complained that the Alice was catching all the small fish and driving away the larger species. Soon the use of purse-nets was forbidden, and the Alice departed.

After this long gap, South African fish are again earning dollars in the United States. When I say fish I am really talking about the crawfish (*Jasus lalandii*) the lobster without claws. I have filled my dinghy with crawfish in an hour often enough. By the time these crawfish reach the table in the sea-food restaurants of New York they are worth ten shillings apiece. At one time France took most of the catch, in tins, and in Paris the Langouste du

Cap was a delicacy. Nowadays the canned crawfish is still a great trade; but much of it is frozen, packed in cellophane and shipped to the United States. This is a £1,000,000 a year business. So the headmen on guano islands to the north of Luderitz see scores of motor-cutters dropping crawfish-nets. As I said before, they have to watch these skippers. Not long ago the headman on Ichaboe found a fishing-boat's crew killing the birds at the far end of the island. The trespassers were truculent. Only after the headman had put a bullet through the leader's arm did they depart.

The richest crawfish area on this coast, and probably in Africa, is at Hottentot Bay, a few miles to the north of Ichaboe. There the crawfish are so abundant that they are often swept on to the beach by the strong current.

Fishermen have picked them up on the sand and filled their dinghies without dropping a net. Crawfish may be caught during a four months' season opening on February 15 each year. Immature crawfish (under 34 inches in length) have to be thrown back. And there is a quota of 4,000,000 lb. each season which may not be exceeded. Crawfish grow slowly, and South-West Africa does not wish to lose this asset.

About eighty boats operate from Luderitz and bring their catches alongside the factories. During the season, more than a thousand coloured people flock to the town from many parts of South-West Africa and as far away as the Cape. Coloured women earn up to £6 a week as factory hands. Coloured fishermen, paid by results, can earn £500 in the season.

When the cutters arrive at the factories the crawfish are offloaded into trolleys and run into ovens. The crawfish, killed instantly by steam, remain there for fifteen minutes. Within two hours the tails have been pulled off, packed in cans and sealed. Crawfish bodies are dried in the sun – you see acres of red crawfish shell on the dunes outside the town – and are then converted into meal or fertilizer.

Yes, the icy river that comes up from the Antarctic and flows through the ocean all the way up the west coast from Table Bay to Angola is a marvellous stream. It supports an abundance and variety of fish such as few other coasts in the world have to offer – everything from sardines to sharks, from the tiny organisms on which all fish love to feed right up the scale to magnificent tuna.

Like the “Coast of Dead Ned”, this sea has its oddities. There is the Valdivia Bank (discovered by the German survey ship Valdivia half a century ago), about four hundred miles from Luderitz. This is a subterranean peak rising steeply for 14,000 feet from the darkness of the ocean floor. Some peaks in the South Atlantic break surface – Ascension, St. Helena, Tristan da Cunha – but this one has a thousand fathoms of water over it. One scientist I know believes that the Valdivia Bank is the home of the giant octopus sometimes cast up on South African shores. A real giant, with tentacles up to twenty-six feet in length.

Then there is the “azoic zone” near Sandwich Harbour where no marine life is found on the bottom. At times submarine eruptions occur, the sea

turns red with an unknown but deadly poison, and there is a mass destruction of fish. Beaches look like gigantic fishmongers' slabs, strewn with millions upon millions of fish – including weird specimens which museums would give much to possess. The air is filled with sulphureted hydrogen. Such events make fishermen despair, however delighted the scientists may be.

Yet beyond the zone of poison runs the nourishing current, rich in the microscopic plants called diatoms – a lasting richness which the diamonds of the coast cannot rival. This is the primary food supply of the sea. Small crustaceans known as copepods graze on the diatoms of the sea-meadows, small fish devour copepods, while larger fish batten on small fish. If the sun played full upon these waters it

would kill the diatoms. Fortunately there are few hot days, although the “Coast of Dead Ned” lies within the tropics. When the sun touches the icy Antarctic current it creates fog; the fog shields the tiny organisms; and thus the west coast is twenty times as rich in fish as the tropical east coast. As an American fishing expert once remarked: “Where Africa pushes her blunt nose into the Antarctic, good fishing may always be expected.”

Sharks weighing more than five million pounds are caught in these waters every year. All sorts, from man-eaters down to the harmless tope (known here as “vaal-haai”) – hooked or netted mainly for the livers, from which vitamin-A oil is extracted.

This is another industry based on experience in California and Florida; though the South African sharkers

have still to learn how to make use of the flesh. Most of it goes back into the sea after the livers have been ripped out. You can hardly blame the fishermen. Not long ago I heard of two brothers in a Cape fishing village who secured 3,000 pounds of shark liver in three days and sold it for £500.

Have you ever tasted shark? It is firm and sweetish, very much like halibut; and it sometimes appears on South African menus as “fillet of sole” without diners being aware of it. America eats a great deal of shark disguised on the menu as “grey fish”; for the Californian sharkers are forbidden by law to waste the flesh. Skate is merely a flat variety of shark, and the public does not object to skate.

Norway puts up mackerel shark in cans, with oil or tomato sauce.

Long ago, when Chinese

labourers were at work in the Rand gold-mines, Cape Town fishermen opened up a market for dried sharks’ flesh. Nowadays kippered shark meat from the Cape coast has to travel all the way to the Belgian Congo before it finds eager native consumers.

Sharks feed just like other food fishes; there is not a chance in a thousand of a man-eater reaching the dinner-table. Still, the prejudice is likely to persist and shark will have to appear in disguise for a long time to come. The future for shark meat is brighter as an agricultural fertilizer. Shark meal is good for cattle, sheep and fowls, as it contains protein and calcium phosphate.

Shark fins, of course, go to China, where such delicacies are relished. A shark fin, in fact, is about the most expensive food in the world. The fin

contains a gelatinous substance prized by mandarins for its vitamins. The tope, so common along the South African coast, is the soup fin shark. The teeth go to the same market. Cleaned and bleached, and often capped with gold, they make necklaces adored by the women of China. They are also used as money.

Men on the guano islands take a hand in the sharking industry. Sharks prey on seals and a man-eater has no difficulty in swallowing a pup. In the off-season, when the island men are bored, the appearance of a man-eater off the jetty is welcomed and the headman brings out his rifle. A shot when the dorsal fin is exposed is often effective. The headman claims the liver.

The largest man-eater ever caught in South African waters measured thirty-

three feet four inches. It was harpooned in Table Bay in 1867 from one of Tom Kehoe's whale-boats. Kehoe cut the head off, rigged a block and tackle, pulled the jaws wide apart and led a donkey through the mouth to amuse the crowd. Table Bay was the scene of the discovery of a new species of shark in 1828, when Sir Andrew Smith (founder of the South African Museum) identified the first whale shark known to science. Smith's whale shark was washed up dead on the beach. It was only fifteen feet in length, a mere infant; but fully-grown whale sharks are the world's largest and reach fifty feet.

Sir Andrew Smith was unable to process the skin effectively, so he sold the new shark to the Paris Museum for £6 – a bargain price. More than a century passed before another whale

shark appeared in South African waters. Even now only about a dozen specimens have been reported from different parts of the world. Little is known of the species, but the size and shape of the mouth prove that it is harmless to man.

The enormous Carcharodon, a real killer, also cruises in these seas and large specimens approach the whale shark in size. This is the "White Death" shark of Australia, and a twenty-footer can gulp down a man without using its teeth. Professor J. L. B. Smith has described a Carcharodon caught at sea which had swallowed a foot of a native, half a goat, two pumpkins and a wicker-covered scent bottle, apart from smaller sharks.

Strange how the riches on the doorstep remain unrecognized, or at all events

uncaught, for centuries. The old Portuguese fished in these waters and recorded their appreciation. Dutch seamen cast their nets and named many of the Cape fish. Yet only now, halfway through the twentieth century, has fishing become one of the great industries of the country.

Probably the Strandlopers were the first to spear fish along the west coast beaches. They were the beachcombing forerunners of the Bushmen, so low in the human scale that most of the time they contented themselves with shellfish, dead whales, dead seals, dead sea-birds, the offal of the ocean. Neither they nor any other natives of these shores ever made boats.

Hottentot fishermen came long after the Strandlopers, and they were more enterprising. Early writers observed them angling with iron hooks and lines

made from the gut and sinews of wild animals. They used mussels for bait, and caught more fish than the Hollanders with their civilized tackle. Hottentots also had nets; and van Riebeeck recorded a troop of the Hottentots called “Caapmens” who arrived at his fort “with ten oxen laden with steenbrasems, killed with assegai’s in a lakelet, and which they exchanged for tobacco”.

Van Riebeeck was grateful for the fish his men caught in Table Bay, as his diary proves. “It appears as if God Almighty will again come to our aid with fish,” he wrote. Then this entry:

“In the evening God Almighty again gave us a fine haul of fish, 1,400 or 1,500 fine harders. Highly required.” But the soldiers of the garrison were not so pleased with the fish diet. Once they mutinied, “angrily demanding

beef or pork”. Van Riebeeck gave them still more fish “to show that we will not submit to orders from the herd”.

Dutch East India ships calling at the Cape had to be supplied with fish, for the Council of Seventeen in Holland pointed out that “the Cape harder, well dried, we have found to be a fine nourishing food for the men”. Private enterprise first appeared on the scene in 1658, when four men who had been released from the Company’s service – T. C. Muller, J. Jansen, J. Elberts and G. Harmanssen – were allowed to settle at Saldanha Bay as fishermen. They bought a boat called the Penguin from the Company; and within a fortnight they had secured their first cargo of fish, salted penguins and thousands of penguin eggs.

Salted penguins were not regarded as a delicacy. One early visitor wrote: "The flesh is of a rank taste and scarce eatable unless it be seven times boiled in fresh water and afterwards fried with butter."

Nevertheless the freemen did a roaring trade, for they had authority to sell all their sea products at whatever price the ships and burghers were prepared to pay. The penguin eggs fetched "four for a double penny". Rhinoceros horns and tusks were side-lines obtained by barter with the Hottentots; and these the fishermen had to sell to the Company at fixed prices.

Saldanha was wild territory three centuries ago, but those free fishermen prospered. Among the Penguin's regular cargoes was seal meat, which was given to the slaves. Fish, rice and seal meat formed the main rations for

the slaves. Owing to frequent fish shortages in the settlement, the slaves were permitted to fish for themselves on Sundays and sell the catch if they wished.

Table Bay fishermen early in the eighteenth century were sometimes tempted to loot the wrecks which littered the beach after winter gales. The far-sighted Company discouraged such wickedness by setting up a gallows near the wrecks. It was recorded in the journal: "By beat of drum all were warned, including free blacks and Chinamen in possession of fishing-boats, not to go near the locality of the wrecks or in the neighbourhood, and not to go beyond the jetty for fishing. All offenders without exception to be hanged."

Yet it is clear that up to the end of the eighteenth century little use was made

of the food supplies of the ocean. Theal the historian noted that while the Dutch in Europe had made fish contribute greatly to their wealth, the Dutch at the Cape had failed to establish a regular export trade in fish. It was only after the British occupation that restrictions were removed and fishing-stations established along the coast.

Though there were Dutch, Chinese and other races engaged in fishing, the most successful of all were the Malays. They held their own as in-shore fishermen for more than two centuries; and their descendants are still manning open boats and motor-boats in Cape waters. They lost their place as the leading fishermen only when the steam trawling era arrived.

In the Malay Archipelago, of course, the Malays had lived in their boats and

were highly-skilled fishermen. Although they were shipped to the Cape as slaves they never lost their love of the sea. When they were freed, fishing was one of the occupations to which they turned naturally. Fishing was almost a Malay monopoly throughout most of last century.

Open boats used for inshore fishing today are very similar in design to the boats sent from Holland to the Cape centuries ago. They are as safe and fast, when rowed or sailed, as any boats can be when you remember that at the end of the day's work they have to be carried with poles on the shoulders of the crew from the sea to beyond high-water mark. It takes sixteen men to lift the larger craft, which run over twenty feet in length; and the strain is intense. But the Malays cling to the old Dutch "buis"

with its small foresail and large spritsail. The only novelty is the spin-naker, which the Malays adopted when an early yachtsman showed how useful it could be with a following wind.

Largest of all the fishing-craft under sail are the vessels of the snoeking fleet, those fine schooners and ketches that follow the migrating shoals along the whole “Coast of Dead Ned”. Queen of the fleet for years was the *Titania*, an old Grand Batiks schooner. She survived all the North Atlantic winter gales only to drift into the surf near Conception Bay on a calm day. *Titania* had no engine. She broke up on those sands, and her crew were rescued after they had drunk the last of the fresh water. Kernwood, another Grand Banks schooner, is still fishing up there at the age of forty.

Before the days of steam trawlers the snoek was the most important fish in South African waters. The early Dutch settlers called it “zee snoek” because it reminded them of the fresh-water pike of Holland. It is a magnificent fish, up to four feet in length, weighing up to nineteen pounds – a blue-grey fighter with ferocious jaws and a swallow-tail. In a good season lasting six months, working all the way south from Walvis to Table Bay, the schooners bring in a million snoek. One year they caught a million and a half. The snoek is a capricious deep-sea fish, and all attempts to trace its migrations have failed. No one knows when the snoek will bite. Skippers need a sixth sense to take their schooners into those areas where the water boils with fish. They can be caught only with lines, strong black

lines with huge, unbarbed hooks and strips of sharkskin or red rag as bait.

One moment the schooner will be rolling along gently under jib and mainsail, all hands on the lookout for the shoals. Four knots is just right. Boards are placed along the main deck so that each man stands within a pen with his fishing tackle. Payment is made on a share system, and only in this way can the individual catches be counted.

Then the fish are sighted and seventeen lines are trailing in the water. Voraciously the snoek leap at the hooks. Within seconds the first fish come over the side. Each man swings his fish under the left arm, presses it against his side, breaks the neck, drops it off the barbless hook and flings his line overboard again. The snoek must be killed, for its bite is dangerous and

often causes blood-poisoning. Sometimes a baton or kierre has to be used to finish the snapping fish.

Exciting while it lasts. They always take the bait near the surface, and there is no time to light a cigarette when the quivering silver is coming in from the sea. The deck is noisy with the beating of the fish. Hooking, hauling, killing, casting; this is feverish work for all hands and the cook. At night the catch must be gutted and salted by lantern-light, no matter how stiff the arms may be, how sore the fingers. At dawn they are on deck again ... fishing.

At times these seas boil with fish. I remember a weird experience related to me by the late Mr. Max Otzen, a Dane who became a director of a diamond company. He kept a motor launch at Luderitz and used it for

fishing. One week-end he was forty miles out, following the snoek shoals in an oily sea.

“That day my launch was almost lifted out of the water by the tightly-packed shoals of fish,” declared Mr. Otzen. “I had to stop the engine for fear of breaking the propeller on that solid, living mass. Apart from the fish, the launch was surrounded by greedy seals, porpoises, and sea-birds which had gorged themselves so heavily that they were unable to rise from the water. The seals were just biting the bellies out of the fish. And I was in the middle of this seething multitude. It was a relief when the shoals moved on, for I was wondering whether I would ever see Luderitz harbour again.”

Chapter 11

“OF ALL THE ACCURSED PLACES”

*But since our women must walk gay
and money buys their gear,
The sealing-boats they filch that
way at hazard year by year.
English they be and Japanee that
hang on the Brown Bear's flank,
And some be Scot, but the worst of
the lot, and the boldest thieves,
be Yank!*

Kipling's “Rhyme of the Three Sealers”.

As it was in the Bering Sea, so it was on the South-West African coast. The bold American sealers were the first to tackle the hazardous rocks of Hollam's Bird Islet, turning-point of the Gamtoos on this cruise.

Hollam's Bird is a wicked-looking outpost. Uninhabited for many years,

it is one of the most inaccessible islets in the world. For this reason, no doubt, it has a huge seal population.

Morrell anchored off Hollam's Bird soon after losing Ogden on Mercury. The isles and the coast were “Dead Ned's” property in those days, and no one disputed Morrell's right to be there. Not long afterwards, however, the islands were seized by the strongest – and the poaching started.

The Gamtoos is here merely to survey the islet and sum up the possibilities of building a house and putting machinery on shore to overcome a problem that seamen have faced for a century and a half.

When you look at Hollam's Bird you realize what a magnificent seaman Morrell must have been. He took fourteen hundred seals there, and not a

word of complaint did he write about the landing conditions. This islet is the result of some mighty convulsion, so that loose blocks of red-brown granite, basalt and lava are piled one on another, the highest point being only forty feet above the sea. It is half a mile in circumference (smaller than Mercury) and the sea thunders heavily on deadly reefs projecting from the north and south-west corners. The tiny islet gives no shelter worth mentioning, for it lies five miles from the coast and the surf breaks round it viciously.

“You land on Hollam’s Bird at the risk of your life,” Mr. T. L. Kruger, superintendent of the islands, told me before I left Cape Town. Mr. Kruger is a heavy-weight, a rugby Springbok in his younger days; not a man to be easily impressed by physical difficulties. But I met tough seamen who

respected Hollam’s Bird more than any other place on the coast. They hated it, and yet it fascinated them. One old skipper put it this way: “You must be a sailor to land on that island.”

This is how it is done – after days or weeks of waiting for a chance. The whale-boat goes cautiously into a gully opposite the mainland, having dodged the seas that meet on the eastern side of the island; seas large enough to capsize a boat. Then the boldest man fastens a lifeline round his body and waits his chance in the bows. Many years ago a ringbolt was cemented into the rocks above the landing-place, and a chain hangs from the bolt. The volunteer jumps for the chain, climbs it and makes the lifeline fast round a boulder. If he misses the chain they haul him back to the boat by the lifeline.

When the whaler has been moored fore and aft the rest of the crew go up the chain, one at a time. This usually takes the best part of an hour. Many a seal hunter has been drowned while attempting to land on Hollam's Bird; many have lost their lives in the jaws or under the massive bodies of the great bull seals they hunted.

I should like to know who Hollam was, the man who gave his name to this wicked islet. One of my old charts calls it Holland's Bird and that may be right. In all probability he was an American sealer or whaler. Morrell seems to have been the first visitor to describe the place; and seventeen years later came Mr. T. E. Eden, the surgeon, after his survey of the "Coast of Dead Ned".

Eden's voyage in the barque Jessie had been unprofitable up to the time of

arrival at Hollam's Bird. He had evidently been warned about the islet, for he remarked in his diary that the first British ship at Hollam's Bird had to wait for a month at anchor before she could land a boat's crew. Even then she would never have loaded a cargo of guano but for the timely arrival of several American whalers, which helped with their boats. After that, few ships succeeded in securing fall cargoes.

However, the Jessie landed her shore party safely and Eden camped with the men on the island. He noted that the bombardment of the cliff by the sea on the eastern side had hollowed it out, so that it leant over; hence the difficulty in gaining a foothold.

Eden's party camped on the highest point of the island. They were constantly menaced by rollers, and one

sea put the fire out. Lower down, towards the south end, they found a spot never reached by the sea, so they moved there thankfully. Even in these grim surroundings the sailors were in high spirits. One man amused himself in the tent by throwing penguins among his companions. "The same Jack put gunpowder in the tinder-box," wrote Eden in his diary. "It nearly blew the cook's nose off when he struck a light in the morning." They ate cormorants on the island. Eden said that the flesh resembled that of a hare, and when kept for a few days it became tender and made good soup or sea-pies.

The seals were shy during Eden's stay. They had been shot at from ships, and would only haul up on the rocks at night. But the Jessie's men shovelled

up the seal guano, "which looked and smelt like rotten cheese".

To vary their diet they collected sea-birds' eggs. They had no means of testing them for freshness before boiling, and Eden reported that some of the ancient eggs exploded violently in the saucepan and blew the lid off, releasing a smell like sulphureted hydrogen.

Eden carried out an experiment while the Jessie lay off Hollam's Bird to discover the amount of guano penguins would produce. Sixteen penguins were placed in the long-boat and the top was covered with netting. They were given dead fish – which a penguin will accept only under protest, and often not at all – and kept in captivity for four weeks. The experiment was a failure, for the

imprisoned birds refused to produce guano in any appreciable quantity.

After three difficult months at Hollam's Bird the Jessie's cable parted and she drifted away from the island. The shore party was marooned for days, and there were only just enough men on board to work the ship. She returned in three days, failed to pick up the anchor, but embarked the shore party – losing the long-boat in the process.

The Jessie was in poor trim for an ocean voyage. With neither minerals nor sufficient guano as ballast, she had to fill her casks with salt water. The chronometer was at fault, sails were carried away. But her master was a determined man, and he anchored again off Hollam's Bird, loaded more guano, and placed a sealed bottle on the island with a message describing

the Jessie's experiences "for the benefit of future voyagers". Then the Jessie departed thankfully, "leaving the birds and seals in fair possession".

Eden took some penguins with him, but most of them escaped at St. Helena and the remainder at Ascension. One of the last entries in his diary mentioned that though the penguins never ate and lost much fat, they remained as bold and active as ever. Next to work Hollam's Bird was Mr. Robert Granger, the Cape Town ship-owner. He was there in 1850, and I found his views on the islet in an old blue-book. "No one had ever been there before or after I took possession," declared Granger. "It is worked at very great risk, and my sealers had to wait eighteen days before they could land. It took two months to load the ship with guano. One year the

rollers washed everything away and nearly took the men. One man could make it impossible for anyone to land on that island.” Evidently the men Granger sent there did not find the Jessie’s bottle or they would have learnt that someone had been there before them.

American ships lost interest in these islands after the end of the guano boom. In 1870, however, ship-owners in New Bedford dispatched the schooner Delia Chase to see whether the guano deposits had been built up again. She landed a party on Hollam’s Bird, which was uninhabited at the time; and the men found a rough hut with an iron roof which had caved in under the weight of guano. This looked promising, but the Delia Chase’s master learnt later that Britain

had seized the islands and that he had no right to load guano.

Mister Milo of Ichaboe knows Hollam’s Bird better than any other living man, and he told me as fantastic a story of the islet as anything I have heard. But I checked every detail and found it was true.

It was in 1897 that Milo first landed there from the Sea Bird. The first thing they saw was a wreck in a gully on the west side, but there was no sign of human beings. Somehow they clambered up the rocks and reached the hut. On the table was a note.

The note had been left by Captain O. Norholm of the Danish barque Dora, 369 tons, bound from Hamburg to Luderitz with general cargo. He wrote that the ship had run on to the islet in fog at the end of January that year and

had broken in half. One man, a passenger, had been drowned. All the Dora's boats had been lost, but the carpenter had built a boat from the wreckage. They intended sailing to Walvis Bay, 130 miles to the north.

The date of the note showed that the Dora's men had left Hollam's Bird the day before the Sea Bird's arrival. From newspaper files I discovered that the Dora's crew made Walvis Bay safely in their rough boat. What resourceful seamen they were in those days!

Captain Malcolm Burr of the Sea Bird then proceeded to loot the wreck of the Dora on his own account. He found the body of the drowned passenger amid the splintered wreckage and flung it overboard without a word of the burial service – much to the disgust of the hardened seal hunters

who were watching. Then he got the liquor out.

“There was a terrible lot of liquor in that ship,” recalled Milo solemnly. “Every man of the sealing party was drunk.” Captain Burr found a quantity of damaged tobacco in the wreck, and sold it to the Sea Bird's crew at the stiff sea price of four shillings a pound. There were shirts, too, and these went into the schooner's slop-chest. Burr took bags of flour and a number of cases of gin and wine, and finally he lifted the barque's fresh-water barrels out and transferred everything movable to the Sea Bird. He sold the liquor to the men on Ichaboe and the other islands; and even the fresh water was sold to the Germans in Luderitz. For these and other misdeeds Burr had to answer later. But all this was typical of the

lawless era on the islands in the adventurous days of sail.

Sealing never went hand in hand with sobriety at that period. Paid by results, the men were often dazzled by their earnings; and when the Sea Bird put into Luderitz all hands went on sprees that lasted for days. In any case a schooner depending on sail alone was subject to delays. One way and another, the delays to the Sea Bird nearly drove the office people mad. Again and again the British Consul in Luderitz had to appeal to the German police to round up the Sea Bird's men and get the schooner away to sea.

Finally the Cape Government decided to sell the Sea Bird and send a steamer sealing. There was an idea at that time that only a sailing vessel could land men on a sealing-rock; the old hands swore that the seals would smell a

steamer and make for the water. However, the Sea Bird was sold, and Skipper Edward Melville Wearin, owner of the S.S. Magnet, was offered the sealing contract.

A mighty man is Wearin, even in his old age. He and Mister Milo went sealing together for many years – a strong partnership. They worked Hollam's Bird successfully, and there they made the record catch of 2,400 seals in one day. There was a small fortune in it, and yet you should hear Skipper Wearin's views of that islet. "Of all the accursed places..."

Wearin is a man worth knowing, a reincarnation of the fine seamen of last century. This huge Australian has massive shoulders and arms; he was a champion swimmer in his youth. As a boy he wanted to go to sea, but his father made him serve his time in an

engineering works. He arrived at the Cape as a soldier during the South African War and stayed on in the Cape Town railway workshops after the war. The pay was good and he was able to have a twenty-two-foot yacht built for the weekends. Wearin still hankered after the sea, and the little Advance helped to satisfy his longing.

Then came a depression, and in 1905 Wearin was sacked. He took out a sealing-licence for Cape waters and turned his yacht into a sealer. After a few profitable seasons along the Cape coast Wearin heard of the rich sealing-grounds near Luderitz. So he sailed north, five hundred miles in his twenty-two-foot cutter, and thought nothing of it.

He set nets for seals off Long Island, parallel nets in the seaweed, close to the reef. Lights attracted the seals at

night, and those that jumped the first net were taken in the second. German poachers were raiding the British rocks, using dynamite, but they sheared off when they saw Wearin and the Advance. Once in a long while Wearin was able to land on Eighty-Four Rock, a treacherous place, but good for anything up to five hundred seals if the weather lasted.

“I sent the large skins to Russia – they used them for sleigh-covers,” recalled Wearin. “Pup skins went to New York, and in a few years I was able to sell the Advance and buy a steamer. Poor old Advance! She dragged her anchor off Staple Rock and was lost with all hands.

“Ay, it’s a dangerous game, sealing. You’re often close to the surf, and many a cutter has been caught between the rocks and the beach,

caught broadside and turned over. Staple Rock has an iron bolt on the summit – you lash yourself to the bolt when the sea sweeps over. I was always lucky about accidents, though. I got two bites on the left arm and two on the left leg ... nothing more. They get excited and snap as they rush past you.”

Wearin’s tiny hooker, the fifty-ton Magnet, had been plying for years between Table Bay Docks and Robben Island. He ran her as an excursion steamer and did some fishing. Then the superintendent of the guano islands called him in and asked him whether he would go sealing for the government.

“So I took the job on,” said Wearin. “The government found the coal and stores, I provided the Magnet at £20 a month, and I was paid by results. Four

shillings a skin I got for myself, and I signed on a sealing crew of twelve white men. Everyone said I was daft.”

On the October day in 1911 when Wearin steamed out for the islands, a group of old sealers gathered on the wharf at Table Bay Docks and jeered.

“We’ll eat all the skins you bring back,” shouted the old sealers.

“I hope you have a damned good feed,” called back Wearin, and on that note the tiny Magnet slipped off to sea.

That was the first time Wearin saw Hollam’s Bird. He picked up Mister Milo and six coloured boatmen at Ichaboe and anchored off Hollam’s Bird. “Of all the accursed places ...”

Wearin pointed to it on the large scale-chart. “I worked it for twenty-five

years – me and Milo,” he told me. “Since I retired in 1936 never a man has worked that island. The gear you need! Marks and anchors, buoy ropes, six-inch warps, barrels and chain. The bottom there is like polished granite, with nowhere for an anchor to hold.”

Somehow the Magnet’s anchors would grip at last, and then Wearin and Mila would climb the rocks and see how the seals were lying. One day they made a rough count – there were sixty thousand seals on the island. It usually supplied them with one-third of the season’s catch.

That first season Wearin cleared £1,000 in two months. He returned to Table Bay with five thousand pelts, a larger haul than any the Sea Bird had ever made.

Wearin had six thousand skins on board the Magnet in August 1914, when war was declared. He knew nothing of it; but the Halifax Island headman, who was friendly with a German lighthouse-keeper, had received a warning. The headman passed it on to Wearin just in time. Wearin got his anchor up and steamed south at full speed; and as he departed he saw a German tug rounding Pedestal Point in pursuit of the Magnet. He got away with his six thousand skins.

When the South African forces invaded South-West Africa, the little Magnet was commandeered to reconnoitre the German held coast. Wearin showed the troops the best landing-places and put intelligence officers on shore near Luderitz. One night he had to swim back to the Magnet – three-quarters of a mile, with a German

patrol firing at him, trying to ignore bullets, the risk of sharks and the icy water. Only a man who held fifty gold and silver cups and medals for swimming could have done it.

Wearin lost the Magnet in a Hout Bay gale in 1916. Six years later he visited Britain and bought the ninety-ton Ranza, a Glasgow herring-carrier. He brought her to Table Bay with a crew of seven in six weeks, and went on with his sealing. South Africa's "one-man shipping line", as people called him, was established again. The Ranza served him well for five years; then he sold her and travelled to Britain again in search of another ship.

This time he bought the coaster Harrier, his last ship and his largest – 200 tons, and 120 feet in length. He and Milo made rich hauls at Hollam's

Bird, and loaded her long fore-deck with skins.

"But I had to clear out for my damn life when the weather made," said Wearin. "You can't steam into the wind with a heavy deck-load like I often had – it meant running to save the skins."

Wearin told me about a sealer who lost his nerve on Hollam's Bird when he saw the whole herd rushing towards him. This man lay flat in a rocky crevice, protecting his head. Scores of seals passed right over him, making for a cliff from which they dived fifty feet into the sea. The man got up unhurt.

One of the tricks of the trade is to wear old; tattered clothes – garments that fall apart if a seal grips a coat-sleeve or trouser leg.

Wearin and Milo used to make up rafts of sealskins and tow them back to the Magnet. All the way they were harried by man eating sharks, which had been attracted by the blood in the water. A shark brushing against a steering-oar causes a shock that may throw a man overboard if he is not prepared for it. They kept the sharks off with ten-foot lances.

Milo really made his pile out of the sealing. The ordinary hands got three pence a skin, which meant a pay-day of £100 to £150 after a season of two or three months. One year everyone made a lot more by summer sealing; but it meant knocking down the pregnant females. Milo said it was cruel. The females gave birth to their pups after they had been knocked down; the pups cried for their mothers; even the most hardened sealers could

not stand it. You should hear Milo talking about seals. Not much of it is in the natural history books, but every phrase comes from personal experience.

“A seal is a queer animal,” says Milo. “He will not bite when he is going past you if you don’t touch him. His mind is on getting to the sea. Some of the big bulls are harmless, but if you see one cocking up his nose – he’s dangerous. When I see one like that I throw my hat down. While he is smelling my hat I let him have it.”

Milo has used a lot of dynamite on seals. He learnt to handle dynamite, as I told you, while breaking up wrecks. Many years ago he found a gang of Italians blasting the rock for a new railway line outside Cape Town. He got dynamite from them; and the manager of a German diamond com-

pany at Luderitz gave him dynamite in exchange for sealskins. Milo referred to sticks of dynamite as “pills”. He killed more than one hundred seals with one “pill”. Dynamite was also useful when the sharks were troublesome at Hollam’s Bird. Some of those sharks were so large that harpoons and lances would not penetrate their skins. Milo saw a thirty-footer there, with a head as large as a chair. Sometimes he shot them with soft-nosed bullets. As a last resort he gave them a “pill”.

Sea elephants, those huge, long-snouted creatures from the Antarctic, seldom venture as far as the South African coast. Strays do arrive at long intervals, however, the males running up to twenty-five feet in length. Mila shot one – stuck the shotgun barrel in

its mouth and fired. That was the only sea-elephant he ever met.

“Never run after a seal when you’re hunting,” says Milo. “You must zigzag your men and drive the seals down the gulch way. That’s the way to get a good knock-down.”

These seals that cluster and breed on Hollam’s Bird and all the other rocks are Cape fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*), a South African species found nowhere else in the world. At one time they were identified at Tristan da Cunha, but they were evidently visitors and not one has been reported from there during the past thirty years.

The peculiarity of the Cape seal lies in the fact that it can use its finned feet to climb; whereas the Arctic and

Antarctic seals have flippers which cannot be brought forward to any extent. Cape seals also have external ears.

Large males are six to eight feet long, and weigh up to nine hundred pounds. Females seldom exceed four and a half feet, and are half the size of the bulls. All the adults are dark brown, but newly-born pups are black, and become a silvery grey later.

Spring each year finds the seal herds hauling up on the islands in great numbers for the mating season. First the ferocious bulls, staking their claims to favourite hollows or ledges, and ready to fight it out with every rival. Then the pregnant females, each one dropping her pup within a few days of arrival. One pup is the normal litter, never more than two. They must

be born on land. A pup born at sea does not survive.

This is a roaring, riotous period on the lone islets. No bull is satisfied until he has gathered twenty or thirty females round him. And no bull gathers his harem without being challenged every minute of the day. After watching the battle of the bulls I felt that the animal kingdom had nothing more to offer me in the way of heavy-weight fury. This is the age-old social order of the seals, and it is devastating in its ruthless adherence to the victory of the strongest.

Medical men find it hard to accept the fact that mating occurs again almost immediately after the pups are born. Zoologists know it is so, though only among the seals. The impregnated females leave the battlefield for the

sea to feed themselves and thus provide milk for their young.

It is a hungry time for the bulls. Week after week they stand guard over their harems. They are rolling in their own blubber when they first haul up; but as time goes on they lose their fat and become less aggressive. After dropping seventy pounds in weight, the lustiest bull seeks sleep rather than a chance of slashing the hide of an enemy with its fangs.

Wherever you go in a seal rookery you find smooth stones brought up by the seals. Some declare that seals use stones as ballast; others that the bulls must have something in their stomachs during the long fast, so they swallow stones.

When the harems break up, the rookery becomes more peaceful.

Young males are able to mingle with young females without arousing the anger of jealous old bulls. Not until the fifth year, however, is the male seal ready to mate. Females reach puberty much earlier.

You may observe seals moulting in the summer months, but autumn is the time when most of the herd shed their old coats and change their colour. Finally, the herd becomes olive-brown, with the year-old pups a lovely olive-grey. This olive-grey pelt is the one sought by the hunters. One blow on the nose kills the pup instantly. They are skinned and salted the same day, for delay is fatal. I heard the story of a disastrous day's sealing when two thousand pups were killed and the skins stacked ready for loading into the boats. Then the sea came up. The men got off the rock in time to save

their lives, but by the time they were able to return every skin had been ruined.

South African pelts are inferior to the Alaskan, for the temperature of the sea determines the duality, and Arctic water promotes thicker and richer fur. Nevertheless, the New York dealers welcome the pup skins offered by the Union Government, and for some years now the prices have been just about equal to those paid for another luxury article – the karakul (Persian lamb) pelts produced inland in South-West Africa.

By-products are paying handsomely, too. Oil from the blubber, vitamin A from the liver, leather from the skins of old seals, poultry feed from the dried carcass. Seal meat is being canned in Luderitz, with tomato sauce as flavouring. It goes to native con-

sumers far inland. Seal oil is used in the treatment of tuberculosis. It is also embodied in margarine and cooking fats, for the modern process yields a pure, light oil with very little free fatty acid. Other new uses include a seal-oil spray for fruit trees and it forms an excellent base for insecticides.

Seals are looked upon as sacred animals by many South African natives, though the Hottentots and Bushmen of the coast do not share this superstition. Other tribes refrain from killing seals, but they have a deep belief in the magical properties of seal blubber and fur. Medicine men present themselves at the Cape Town depot of the island administration and ask for “sea dog fat”. They also purchase skins which are unsuitable for export, cut them into small pieces, and use them for mysterious purposes.

There was a time when only the Chinese knew how to dress a sealskin. Jewish firms in Leipzig mastered the art and held the market there for many years; they fled from Hitler, so that now London and New York share this valuable trade. Women have hankered after sealskins ever since the middle of the eighteenth century, when Catharine the Great of Russia set the fashion. – The trade has known many vicissitudes, but it has never collapsed like the ostrich-feather market.

Forty years ago German poachers raided the rocks off the “Coast of Dead Ned” on such a ferocious scale that prices fell on the London market. It was the tale of the Pribilof Islands all over again on the African coast; but the Cape Government was never able to deal with the Germans as Theodore Roosevelt did with the Japanese.

Nowadays, however, the herds are carefully preserved. Not more than six thousand skins are taken each year (compared with fifty thousand killed every year by the American Department of Fisheries in Alaskan waters), and if the market is not promising the seals are left undisturbed for two years or more at a stretch. Under this system there is no fear of extermination – in fact, the fishermen often complain that the seal herds are increasing and endangering the industry.

Sea elephants, as I have already noted, sometimes make the journey of thousands of miles from the Antarctic islands to the South African coast. These huge battle-scarred warriors are moved by some impulse to forsake their own kind, and they perish on distant shores. I have seen them at

least half a dozen times on Cape Peninsula beaches; but they come only at intervals of years and must be classed as occasional visitors.

A unique visitor of the tribe was a sea leopard, found dead in 1946 near East London, Cape Province. After the sea elephant, this is the largest Antarctic seal. No specimen had ever been reported in South Africa before. Female sea leopards are larger than the males, up to twelve feet in length. The name comes from the black and silver spots on the dark grey shoulders. They eat not only fish but any sea-birds they can catch.

Wearin's "accursed place" is still unoccupied, save by the seals. The name Hollam's Bird suggests that it was once a seabird stronghold, and that the seals took possession of it in fairly recent times when they were

driven from more accessible places by the hunters.

It is easy enough for a seal to haul up on Hollam's Bird, for part of the islet slopes gently to the sea. This part is swept by every wave, however, so that men are forced to land elsewhere. The sloping rock, one of the old hands told me, must have been the scene of a shipwreck long ago. An old-fashioned anchor and other relics are wedged in the crevices.

"A rough house", was the way Wearin described Hollam's Bird. "It knocked the stuffing out of us. If you could only have the luck to get three days' fine weather it was all right – but we seldom got it. Of all the accursed places ...

Chapter 12

PORT OF THE ISLANDS

After the “accursed isle” it is strange to be walking on pavements and looking into shop windows. But the Gamtoos has brought me south again. She is snugly at anchor off Penguin Island while I am calling on old friends in Luderitz, port of the islands.

Those sailormen who manned the islands long ago never knew when they would next slake their thirsts, and as a rule they had to go all the way back to Black Sophie before they were sure of their beer. In their day, Angra Peduena meant nothing more than a sheltered anchorage and a place where the Hottentots came to sell cattle.

Even when the Germans arrived and called the place Luderitzbucht the desert harbour did not change much.

For nearly thirty years after the hoisting of the German flag, the settlement was no more than a collection of shacks. All the fresh water had to be brought from Cape Town by sea.

Diamonds transformed the scene. The modern Luderitz is the town that diamonds built. Forty years ago the solid buildings began to rise from the sand; a fantastic town such as you will find in no other corner of the globe.

I am thinking of it now as I saw it one night while I was walking down Bismarckstrasse under the moon. I had enjoyed the full-bodied Rudesheitner with my German dinner. Now I was in Africa again, and yet the skyline was Teutonic, like an illustration from Grimm’s fairy-tales. The roofs came so steeply towards the pavement that one looked for an avalanche of snow. I

could see timbers built into the walls, turrets against the stars, cupolas at street corners. At that moment it was like a remembered night in Hamburg.

Somewhere above the harbour a cafe served rich coffee in the continental way, and fruit tart with helpings of cream. Beer gardens and bars with German furniture heightened the effect. It is thirty-five years since the German flag was hauled down; but I must say that the German ideas of comfort which linger on here are very much to my taste.

Perhaps it was the dryness of Luderitz that made the Germans drink more than usual, or perhaps the diamond discoveries put them in reckless mood.

They had their flaxen barmaids, and the champagne atmosphere of a successful mining camp. At times, apart from a rainfall of less than an

inch a year, they had a crisp and invigorating climate. Then the sandstorms or the fogs would drive them into the bars again.

Up on the hill were the Green House and the Brown House, fondly remembered by old residents who would no longer be patrons in the full sense of the word. I was shown old directories in which these places were listed in the matter-of-fact German manner, with the names and occupations of those who lived there plainly stated. These houses were opened with the approval of the German authorities for the use of soldiers awaiting repatriation after the native wars. But the young civilians of the town decided to use the houses as clubs. They played cards and drank beer there. Almost everyone gathered at the Green or the Brown House – the magistrate, the harbour-

master and other leading officials. Accounts were sent out monthly. It would have been a breach of etiquette to offer cash.

“Those were wild days,” an elderly resident told me wistfully. “Drinks were ordered by the case – French brandy or champagne. Then we would sit down and play cards until seven in the morning. When the first white baby was born in Luderitz the whole town was drunk for days.”

“What happened to the girls in the Green House and the Brown House?” I asked. But I was not prepared for the answer. “They married when the houses were closed – and made excellent wives.”

Modern, respectable Luderitz is still a town of adventurers. It is part of the “Coast of Dead Ned”, and there are

many in the town who can recall dangerous journeys by land or sea along those desert shores. In the little museum they have some grim exhibits, including the boots of a man who rode out of Luderitz on a camel one day and was found twenty years later, when the dune that had covered his body moved on at last. There, too, you can see petrified relics of the period, many thousands of years ago, when there were palm forests and flowers in this desert. Today the only plants you will find are the tiny but fascinating succulents, rare and weird, prized by collectors in the United States and elsewhere.

Newcomers to Luderitz are told that it is a crime to stand in the shade of a tree. You have to cross eighty miles of Namib Desert to find the first tree. One or two small gardens survive with

the aid of bath-water, but all the earth has been brought across the desert from more fertile places. Yet some humorist named one of the streets Unter den Linden.

Though water is no longer brought to Luderitz by sea, it is still a problem. Everything depends on the distilling plant near the water-front. Day and night it sucks up sea-water and supplies one hundred and fifty tons of fresh water a day. It is pumped into tanks on top of the Diamantberg, and piped to houses. I paid one shilling and sixpence for every bath at my hotel, which gives you an idea of the price.

In the height of the fishing season, when the factories are packing crawfish and snoek, there is never enough water to go round. Special tank trains are sent down to the coast, but often

the Luderitz resident turns on his taps in vain. Then they buy bottles of soda-water for washing and satisfy their thirst with the light South-West African beer. Old citizens told me that they prefer the present system to the time when they had to send their servants down to the wharf with barrels to buy water from ships.

If you are seized by peculiar stomach pains in Luderitz (as I was) they laugh and tell you that you have a "Luderitzbuchter". The complaint is due to drinking distilled water, which is deficient in minerals. Prevention is better than cure, they say, and to ward off a "Luderitzbuchter" you simply take more beer.

Sandstorms are common in Luderitz, but in January 1948 the town was struck by the most severe sandstorm of the century. For three days the wind

was violent; on the fourth day it reached gale force and covered the whole town in a thick red mist. Dunes formed in the streets. Roofs were blown off and fishing boats were driven on to the beach.

“If you looked at the sun it was like observing an eclipse,” one resident told me. “You could stare into the sun at noon without straining your eyes.”

Houses at Luderitz are built to resist the blast, but during this storm the floor of every house was inches deep in sand. The railway line running inland was buried, and no train got through for days. Motorists abandoned their cars and took shelter at railway sidings.

That railway was one of the most difficult construction feats in the world, for the drifting sand and the

lack of water were formidable enemies. Apart from the huge gangs at work on the line, the Germans had to bring up fifteen hundred Afrikaner transport riders from the Cape to carry food and water by wagon to the desert gangs. They formed a town of their own in Luderitz, all under canvas. There was also a camel corps with more than a thousand camels operating along the railway line in the desert.

Many residents recall the early trains running up through the Namib to Aus, when they travelled in open trucks and carried their own bedding and beer. For eighty miles, both sides of the line were littered with bottles.

Old residents also recall the remittance men – charming fellows, but unreliable in money matters”, was one description I heard. If their allowances did not arrive they cabled to their

parents in Germany, giving their sailing date and the name of the ship. The, money came by return.

I asked one elderly German what he missed in the modern Luderitz compared with the old regime. "The police with swords and jackboots," he replied. "And the notices everywhere saying 'Verstrengt Verboten'. Germans enjoy strict discipline."

However, there is one remnant of regimentation which is observed in Luderitz as carefully today as it was forty years ago. just outside the town, in every direction, are notice-boards informing you that you are on the edge of a forbidden diamond area. Diamonds have been picked up in the streets of Luderitz though people have lived there all their lives without ever seeing an uncut stone. Yet a visiting school-teacher went for a walk, shook

the sand out of her shoes, and found she had innocently collected a small diamond.

Down in the harbour this evening, among the crawfish cutters, is a little, old-fashioned ketch flying the Estonian flag. She has come from the cold Baltic to find refuge at last in the shallow bay which has sheltered so many odd and adventurous craft.

Luderitz has seen a string of little Estonian ships since the end of the Second World War. They have blown in there thankfully, holds packed with men, women,. even babies; all fleeing from the Russians. One of them, the Ann-Mari, had forty souls on board, led by a Lutheran pastor. And all of them told the same story of sea ordeal, of sails that carried away, engines that broke down, storms that drove them

back so that they spent months at sea before they reached this sanctuary. I believe the first Portuguese explorers who named Angra Pequena were more comfortable than these battered, dogged Estonians.

Angra Pequena saw the Alabama while Semmes was operating in South African waters. She met her supply ship, the captured Tuscaloosa, the prize Sea Bride, on August 28, 1863, in the harbour. Captain Semmes chose this corner of "no-man's-land" to avoid further international complications. He sold the Sea Bride and her cargo to de Pass and Spence, who paid cash in golden sovereigns. Some half-starved Hottentots came on the scene begging for food, and Semmes fed them. Then he sailed back to the Cape, just missing the heavily armed Federal cruiser Vanderbilt.

One month later the Vanderbilt entered Angra Pequena bay in search of the Alabama, and found the barque Saxon instead. The Saxon, owned by a Cape Town firm, had loaded a cargo of coal from the Tuscaloosa; this was Federal coal and under international law the Saxon became the Vanderbilt's prize.

While the Saxon was being seized there occurred a tragic incident which had international repercussions. The boarding party was led by the Vanderbilt's first lieutenant. He lost his head and shot Gray, chief officer of the Saxon. There was no excuse for the shooting, for there had been no resistance. The first lieutenant was placed under arrest by the captain of the Vanderbilt, and both ships' companies attended the burial of Gray on the mainland.

The coal from the Saxon was dumped on Penguin Island. When the Governor of the Cape protested against these proceedings it was found that Penguin Island had not been annexed at the same time as Ichaboe, and so the British Government had no jurisdiction there. The Saxon departed with a prize crew on board and became a privateer under the Yankee ensign.

Another dramatic interlude in this desert harbour was recorded late in 1904, when a black-painted fleet arrived for coal and other supplies. They were Russian men-o'-war under Admiral Rozhdesvensky, bound for the Far East with orders to attack the superior Japanese fleet.

The Russians had been suffering from nerves during the grim voyage to inevitable defeat. In the North Sea they identified a number of British

trawlers as Japanese torpedo-boats, and fired on them in the darkness. Five trawlers had been sunk, and relations between Britain and Russia were strained. For this reason the Russian admiral had been forced to seek supplies outside British territory.

His choice of Luderitz was unfortunate, for a gale blew up and the large ships had to put to sea. After this delay, however, the Russians were entertained on shore and supplied with enough coal to reach Madagascar direct.

Angra Pequena of the Portuguese has given shelter to many odd craft since Diaz raised his stone pillar near where the Diaz Point lighthouse now stands.

The man who brought the German flag to the "Coast of Dead Ned" was

Luderitz of Bremen, one of those Hanseatic adventurers who opened up trade with many long stretches of the African coast. Adolf Luderitz started his career abroad as a tobacco planter in Virginia, moved on to Mexico where he had a ranch and lost most of his money in a revolution.

He left Mexico after five years with a bullet in his knee, but with the spirit of enterprise undimmed. Back in Hamburg he met Karl Timpe, a sea captain who told him of the “no-man’s-land” of South-West Africa and the harbour of Angra Pequena which no nation had claimed. Luderitz went to Bismarck with his schemes, though he had never been in Africa and had only a vague idea of the territory for which he was seeking German protection.

That was in 1882, before the “Iron Chancellor” had started to build up Germany’s colonial empire. Bismarck was busy in Europe. He told Luderitz that he would have to fend for himself.

Luderitz was not discouraged. He engaged a young friend, Heinrich Vogelsang, to spy out the land for him.

Vogelsang landed in Cape Town and made cautious inquiries about the little-known country north of the Orange River then known as Transgariep or Damaraland. Meanwhile the brig Tilly, chartered by Luderitz, was on the way south. By the time she arrived Vogelsang had learnt that Angra Pequena was still unclaimed and beyond the law. He gathered a band of adventurous spirits round him and swore them to secrecy.

In the holds of the Tilly were guns and gunpowder, ox wagons and tents

bought in Cape Town, water-boring machinery, pumps and drought-resistant trees, and the inevitable barrels of trade gin and rum without which no expedition of those days could hope to prosper. Four days at sea and on April 12, 1883, the Tilly anchored in the shallow harbour of Angra Pequena, and landed these pioneer German settlers. There were also several Hollanders in the party and a Swiss named Pestolozzi. They found, as they expected, a solitary white man living in a shack beside the bay. He was David Radford, an English trader who kept an eye on the guano islands at Angra Pequena on behalf of de Pass and Spence. Radford had his wife and family with him. He had been there for twelve years, curing fish, bartering cattle, and scraping

Halifax, Seal and Penguin islands in the season.

Radford had set up his establishment on the eastern side of the lagoon, at the place now called Radford's Bay. The Germans chose a site on the far side of the bay, built a barricade of sandbags and named it Fort Vogelsang.

Vogelsang, only twenty years old, was a man of action. His orders were to buy the territory round Angra Pequena. Soon after landing he sent a Bushman on the hundred-mile journey inland to Bethanie, the mission where Joseph Fredericks, the Hottentot chief, had settled. Fredericks replied inviting the Germans to visit him; and an historic meeting took place at the mission. Vogelsang paid Fredericks a hundred golden sovereigns and sixty guns on May 1, 1883, and rode back to the coast with title deeds to Angra

Pequena and five miles of desert surrounding it.

Radford was flying the Union Jack over his shack. Vogelsang hauled it down and hoisted the red, white and black German flag for the first time in South-West Africa. A rusty cannon had been found in the sand beside the bay. This was charged with gunpowder and fired in honour of the occasion.

Soon afterwards young Vogelsang rode up to Bethanie again, paid a further £500 in cash and two hundred guns, and received another document signed by Joseph Fredericks granting him the whole coastline from the Orange River to a point a long way north of the Orange River. Adolf Luderitz appeared on the scene in person in September 1883 and took charge of the trading station.

By this time de Pass, Spence and Company and other firms with interests on the coast had become seriously perturbed by the German intervention. Bismarck was still holding aloof, however, and there were some who found comfort in his famous remark: "For Germany to acquire colonies would be like the poverty stricken Polish nobleman providing himself with silks and sable when he needed shirts."

On the other hand there was a strong feeling in diplomatic circles that Germany intended to gain a footing in Africa. Support was given to this view by a remarkable article in the Berlin, "Geographische Nachrichten" – thought to be inspired – written by Ernst von Weber.

Von Weber declared: "A new empire, possibly more valuable and more

brilliant than even the Indian Empire, awaits in Africa that Power which shall possess sufficient courage, strength and intelligence to acquire it. Germany ought not to resign all this immense spoil to England. In South-West Africa we Germans have a peculiar interest, for here dwell a splendid race of people nearly allied to us by speech and habits. In appearance and character the Boers are in every way the same as our sturdy Westphalians, Frieslanders and Schleswig-Holsteiners; but as a rule they surpass them in size and weight, for you rarely see a Boer who is not at least six feet high. I know of no race in the world which offers such splendid material for Grenadier Guards and Cuirassiers."

There were a few Boer hunters in the South-West African hinterland at that

period. Though they might have been flattered by von Weber's description, they would certainly have resisted any attempt to turn them into German soldiers. For the adventurous Boer, trekking in his wagon, the main charm of South-West Africa was its freedom.

British men-o'-war now began calling at Angra Pequena to see what it was all about. Lieutenant F. W. Sanders put in there in H.M.S. Starling and found "a young intelligent gentleman named Wagner" in charge.

Wagner claimed that the guano islands in the harbour had been included in the sale. He was expecting a German warship, he said. However, the little settlement had almost run out of fresh water, and Wagner thankfully accepted half a ton from the Starling's tanks.

Sanders hastened back to the Cape to report that serious complications might arise at any moment. He said that the Germans had opened up a route to Bethanie by bullock-wagon, and that they were supplying the Hottentots with Snider rifles and needle-guns. They expected to secure ostrich feathers, ivory, cattle and sheep in exchange.

Captain Edward Church was sent to Angra Pequena immediately in H.M.S. Boadicea. By this time Luderitz and Vogelsang had returned from a journey into the interior, and Luderitz started his claim to the territory.

It was an awkward situation for the British captain. Since the rush to Ichaboe had ended, this remote desert coast had faded into obscurity; and no one seemed to know whether Britain had annexed anything apart from the

islands. Boards had been set up on the islands (including those in Angra Pequena harbour), but the writing had been obliterated by sand and sun. Captain Church steamed on to Ichaboe in search of enlightenment, and John Gove informed him: "I presume that Angra Pequena is the property of the Queen."

Church found that the Germans had set up a large wooden store with living-rooms, all under one roof. (It is still there, near the shore opposite Penguin Island, having resisted at the weather for sixty-seven years. The store now forms part of a fish-canning factory, and the manager told me that he valued it at £2,000.) Church had orders to "prevent a clash" between Germans and English. There was no risk of a clash, and so Church returned to his base to report.



The board, still preserved on Ichaboe, which was left there by the British man-o'-war when the island was annexed

This report alarmed the Cape Government, which protested to the British Government as follows: “It is impossible to ignore the complications which may arise in a country which has hitherto been considered as a kind of commercial dependency of this colony, or from the inevitable interference in native feuds which devastate that territory by Europeans who acquire anything like a permanent footing in the country.”

That was the trouble – the Cape Government had been content to regard South-West Africa as a “commercial dependency”, but Britain had never formally annexed any part of it beyond Walvis Bay and the islands. In fact, Britain had refused to protect the German missionaries in the interior, in spite of more than one request from Berlin.

Even now, with the Germans on the doorstep, Britain refused to act. Cape Town firms established on the coast, and the Cape Government, were in despair. They knew that delay would be fatal, and so it was. At the end of 1883 the German Ambassador in London informed the British Colonial Office that his government felt bound to “afford protection and encouragement to German subjects trafficking in districts where sufficient protection is not guaranteed by a recognized civil organization”.

And on August 7, 1884, the German frigate Elizabeth steamed into Angra Pequena, fired a royal salute, landed a naval detachment, hoisted the German flag and declared that Germany had taken possession of the coast and all the guano islands within gunshot of the mainland.

When the booming of the salute died away, the diplomatic battle opened – a first-class crisis handled with great skill by Bismarck, the “Iron Chancellor”. His man on the spot was Dr. Heinrich Goering, father of the ill-fated Hermann.

Britain, awake at last, was determined not to give up everything without a struggle-and certainly not the islands.

There was also an idea abroad that Germany intended to establish a convict settlement at Angra Pequena, a sort of African “Devil’s Island”. This idea was strengthened by an official note from Bismarck in which he stated that Britain was not in a position to dictate conditions to Germany regarding the form the new colony would take. British anxiety in this respect was due to the strong anti-

convict feeling at the Cape. Thirty-six years previously the people of Cape Town had almost risen in revolt, when the British convict ship Neptune had arrived in Table Bay with the intention of landing her prisoners. That plan had been frustrated, and the colonists were still hotly opposed to any penal settlement on the coast, even five hundred miles away.

In fact, Bismarck had no desire to transport convicts. He was merely protesting against British interference in German territory. But that fact did not emerge for some time.

Most vehement of all those opposing the German claims at Angra Pequena were the de Pass brothers and their partner Captain Spence. Immediately after the annexation Luderitz had ordered Spence to remove all his men from all the islands, including Ichaboe.

Spence refused, and a British gunboat was sent to Angra Pequena to point out that Britain had never waived her claim to the islands.

Still, there were some difficult points to settle. Shark island in the harbour at Angra Pequena was so close to the shore that it was possible to walk across at low tide. Bismarck argued that Shark Island was an island in name only. And the Germans, on the spot reinforced this argument by hastily building a causeway between the beach and the island.

Then came the legal definition of “within gunshot of the mainland”. Many an international dispute has raged round the old “three-mile limit”, which started in the eighteenth century as the range of a cannon – i.e., the distance over which a country could exert its dominion.

For some time one sea league (roughly three miles) remained the range of cannon. As late as 1733 the United States recognized this principle in defining territorial waters. But cannon did not abide by this range. They threw their projectiles further and further; and in 1864 the United States claimed a five-mile limit. It came up again this century when Japanese, Russian and Canadian ships hunted seals mercilessly off the Alaskan rookeries and the herds were being exterminated.

Bismarck raised the point in the hope of securing most of the guano islands. Only Hollam's Bird lies outside the three mile limit. But while he knew that his chances of success there were slight, he wished to make sure of a number of sealing-rocks close to the coast, and not specifically mentioned

when Britain annexed the guano islands.

Another point which influenced Bismarck in continuing his struggle for the islands was the fact that Britain was unable to prove her ownership. Luderitz had his document bearing the mark of Chief Joseph Fredericks, and it was argued that the sale of the coast must have included the islands. When the British men-o'-war had taken possession of Ichaboe and the other islands, it had not occurred to anyone that the Hottentots might be regarded as owners. Yet according to international law, the owners of the coast must also have owned the islands.

While the diplomatic quarrel was raging at high levels in Europe, the crafty Adolf Luderitz was playing his own game at Angra Pequena.

Bismarck probably had difficulty in finding a map or chart with the islands accurately marked, but Luderitz had only to look out of the window of his store to realize how embarrassing it was to have a foreign power holding the islands at his front door. So he set about disturbing the British occupiers of the islands as much as possible with the idea of driving them away.

Very soon Captain Spence was complaining that the Germans on the mainland were constantly blasting with gunpowder and firing salutes from Fort Vogelsang. When German men-o'-war entered the harbour they used steam whistles. The birds had been frightened off Penguin and Seal Islands, and Spence estimated the loss at £2,660.

Luderitz replied by informing the Governor of the Cape Colony that all

the islands within gunshot of the coast had come into his possession as a result of his treaty with Fredericks, and he called upon Captain Spence to vacate them at once.

More protests were sent to Berlin, and early in 1885 a joint Commission of British and German officials was appointed to examine all claims in the former no-man's-land. Mr. S. G. A. Shippard, a judge, was the British commissioner, while Dr. E. Bieber, the German consul in Cape Town, acted for his country. A long string of sea captains, business men, prospectors and other adventurers gave evidence at Government House, Cape Town.

Captain John Spence told the commissioners that his men had worked a shark fishery on Shark Island-hence the name. The coast had been entirely under his control for

thirty years. He had received concessions from the Hottentot chiefs and had worked silver and copper mines inland.

“I claim Shark Island,” declared Spence. “If my people are there, the birds on the other islands in the harbour will not be disturbed. Shark Island was once a guano island, but the jackals got across at low tide and killed the birds. The island comes within the grant I secured from the Hottentots – they gave me a clean sweep of all the islands, islets and rocks between Sinclair’s Island and Hollam’s Bird.”

After hearing evidence in Cape Town the two commissioners took passage in H.M.S. Sylvia to interview the men on the coast and the islands. They talked to John Gove on Ichaboe, and he told them about a guano deposit at

Hottentot Bay on the mainland which had been discovered and claimed by Captain Spence.

The peninsula forming Hottentot Bay had once been an island. When the channel silted up the jackals had destroyed the birds, as on Shark Island. The guano of centuries was left, but it was of poor quality and covered with sand. Although this guano had lost its smell, it contained phosphates; and Gove and his men gathered several hundred tons a year to mix with the fresh guano. By itself the old guano was not worth more than fifty shillings a ton, but it was mixed bag for bag on board ship and thus the value was raised.

That was one of Spence’s claims on the mainland. Sandwich Harbour was another. And when the commissioners returned to Cape Town, Spence was

called again as a witness and declared that he had spent £6,000 on prospecting expeditions into the interior.

Captain W. Peterssen, who acted as Spence's agent on the coast, said he had been present when H.M.S. Valorous took possession of the islands. Captain Forsyth of the man-o'-war, he stated, had annexed the bay of Angra Pequena for Britain, and had set up a notice-board on which the bay was called Penguin Harbour.

After hearing all the evidence, Mr. Shippard and Dr. Bieber were unable to agree. Stinging articles attacking Britain appeared in the Berlin newspapers, clearly inspired by Bismarck; and Bismarck sent his own son, Count Herbert Bismarck, on a special mission to London to explain German colonial policy. Count Bismarck had a

card up his sleeve – he was to inform Lord Granville, the Foreign Minister, that if Germany's claims were not recognized, Bismarck would withdraw his support of British policy in Egypt.

Never before had the desolate bird islands and the "Coast of Dead Ned" gained such international prominence. One wonders whether the diplomats who quarrelled so bitterly over this distant shore would have felt as strongly on the subject if they could have seen the waterless isles and the barren coastline.

At this time Russia appeared to be about to invade Afghanistan. Count Bismarck, the able son of a brilliant father, brought out the significance of events in the East to the full and made Lord Granville realize the value of Germany's friendship. One commission having failed, another was set up

– this time in Berlin. And Dr. Goering was sent to South-West Africa with the title of Reich Commissioner for the Protectorate of Luderitzland.

Goering landed in July 1855, rode inland on horseback, made agreements with Hottentot and Herero chiefs, and also visited Cape Town on his diplomatic mission. But whereas his son was to command a huge Air Force, the father had an “army” of one German sergeant, a few privates, and twenty armed half-castes. Heinrich Goering and his son had this in common, however; both loved their medals, and an old photograph of Heinrich Goering in South-West Africa which I have seen reveals a row of decorations. (Heinrich Goering had served in the Prussian Army and had seen active service against Austria and in the war of 1870 in France.) The

decorations did not impress the natives of South-West Africa. War broke out between the Hereros and Hottentots, and Goering was severely criticized in the Reichstag for his failure to preserve the peace.

While Heinrich Goering was riding about with his comic army (the half-castes mounted on oxen for lack of horses), reinforcements were sent under Captain von Francois. Germany little knew at that time that many thousands of troops would have to wage a campaign lasting for years and costing millions before the territory she was claiming would be conquered.

Goering held his post in South-West Africa for five years and retired soon afterwards. Some months after his arrival the Berlin commission settled all territorial disputes.

The country, 322,000 square miles of it – three-fourths the area of the Union of South Africa – went to Germany. It was decided that Shark Island was not an island; and, for what it was worth, it became German. Britain retained all the guano islands, but Germany gained possession of the sealing rocks known as, Eighty-Four, Black Rock, Staple Rock and Staple Reef and other unnamed rocks which had not been mentioned in the British proclamation. The dogged Captain Spence was given permission to work his Sandwich Harbour fishery and his guano on the mainland at Hottentots Bay.

British prestige suffered heavily in this diplomatic duel. For years Germany had almost begged Britain to annex the country and protect the German missionaries. Only when Bismarck acted did Britain regret her “laissez-

faire” policy. Bismarck played his hand superbly, and he was extremely disappointed (and said so) when he found that he had not secured the guano islands as well. However, he felt they were not worth further diplomatic bargaining.

Luderitz, the man who had started it all, a tall and charming man with gold-rimmed spectacles, soon found that riches hidden beneath sand are hard to come by. He made a number of prospecting journeys without result, and his cattle trade did not prosper.

Finally he tired of financing the venture and wrote to his wife in Germany: “I have put 500,000 marks into Angra Pequena by now. The expeditions consume too great sums and nobody assists me.”

In vain he applied to Rothschild, the great financier of the period. After a time, however, Luderitz was able to sell out to a newly formed enterprise, the German Colonial Company for South-West Africa. He received 300,000 marks and a five per cent share of future profits.

Thus encouraged, Luderitz went on further prospecting trips. The country had gripped him as it has held many others; and he showed great determination in his efforts to uncover valuable minerals. In October 1886, at the mouth of the Orange River, he decided to make a crazy voyage back to Angra Pequena in a canvas boat.

He sailed off accompanied by one Steingrover, a sailor, and watched by a farmer named Coetzee. They were never seen again. All the guano islands south of Angra Pequena were visited

but there was no news of the missing men. Long afterwards a prospector, Klinghardt, found a fragment of the canvas boat on a beach to the north of the river.

Up at Fort Vogelsang the German exiles still amused themselves by firing salutes. In February 1887, the Sea Bird brought one of Luderitz's men to Cape Town for medical attention; he had blown off four fingers while discharging the cannon.

Mr. Daniel de Pass and Captain Spence did not miss this opportunity. "This is the third man to be maimed by a cannon," they protested to the German Consul. "The sound can be heard as far away as Ichaboe, and our birds are being disturbed."

Penguin Island yielded a fair crop of guano in Captain Spence's day – hence the anxiety when the Germans at Fort Vogelsang, less than a mile away, played with their cannon.

Today the guano on this island at the busy harbour entrance is hardly worth gathering. Penguin Island, however, serves a useful purpose. It is impossible to leave women on the other islands when all the headmen and their assistants go sealing; so during that season Penguin Island becomes an island of women and children.

There are three solid houses, which cost £162 apiece when they were built shortly before the Second World War. (Labour does not count – the department has its own builder, and there are always labourers.) The headman lives in one house. Aleck Fourie, skipper of the Pikkewyn, has another and the

motor cutter's engineer has the third. For this is the Pikkewyn's base, and from here she sets out on her regular voyages with fresh provisions for the distant isles.

Exiles on those isolated islands envy the Penguin Island families. It is not so much a matter of shopping or shore amusements; for the island people do not fret in solitude. But many of the island children go to boarding-school at Aus, eighty miles inland from Luderitz, and those whose parents live on Penguin Island are sometimes able to spend a week-end at home. Nearly all the others are Separated from their parents for long periods.

Penguin Island has a little boat harbour and boat-sheds built by the headman. Here, as at Possession, I found a miniature garden protected by canvas – just a few square feet of



I found a miniature garden protected by canvas

imported earth producing a handful of tomatoes and potatoes. A bleak place, Penguin, without much bird life to relieve the bare rock. As I trudged up the huge sloping boulders to the summit of the island I noticed two varieties of lizards, presumably living on insects. Lizards found their way into one of the water-tanks not long ago, the headman told me, and they could only use the water for washing.

Men of the Cape Garrison Artillery who were stationed on Penguin Island in November 1914, and long afterwards, feel no nostalgic yearnings towards that large, bare rock. This was the monotony of war in an acute form. Von Spee's squadron was expected to attack Luderitz with six-inch guns; so the artillery detachment was dumped on Penguin with a four point seven which had last been fired in anger

while Ladysmith was besieged during the South African War.

“On the day I landed at Luderitz I saw a soldier killed by a bomb from a German aircraft – the first casualty of that kind ever known in Africa,” one of the gunners told me. “That was the last exciting incident for a long time. Penguin Island was infested with rats, and we passed the time devising new and ingenious traps. There was no shelter, except for the rations. We fished from a dinghy and also shot seagulls for food. Supplies came from Luderitz once a week. Von Spee never arrived.”

Just to the north of Penguin is Seal Island, almost worthless, from the guano point of view and uninhabited. My friend Dave Wilson spent a day there during his “official search for diamonds; but he told me that fleas

drove him out of the cave near sea-level where the gravel looked most promising.

Shark Island has seen more suffering, more lingering deaths, than any of the real islands; or, in fact, any other part of the “Coast of Dead Ned”.

This was the Belsen of German South-West Africa in the ghastly wars against the Hottentots early this century. Here the Germans drove their victims and left them with insufficient food and water. Here they died miserably – not in scores but in thousands.

It is all faithfully recorded in the Union Government official blue-book, “Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and their Treatment by Germany”, published in 1918. Let Edward Fredericks, son of the old

Chief Joseph Fredericks (who sold the coast to the Germans) tell the story:

“In 1906 the Germans took me prisoner after we had made peace and sent me with about a thousand other Hottentots to Shark Island, men, women and children. We were beaten daily by the Germans, who used sjamboks. They were most cruel to us. The young girls were violated by the guards at night. Lots of my people died. [Here follows a list.] I gave up compiling it as I was afraid we were all going to die.”

Fritz Isaac, son of an underchief of the Witbooi Hottentots, added his testimony: “After the war I was sent to Shark Island. We remained on the island one year. Three thousand five hundred Hottentots and other natives were sent to the island and one hundred and ninety-three returned. All

the rest died.” Johann Noothout, a Hollander who landed at Luderitz in 1906, gave evidence when the official record of these atrocities was being compiled. He stated that he saw nearly five hundred native women lying on the beach starving to death. The corpses were eaten by jackals. “The Germans soldiery spoke freely of atrocities committed by Hereros and Hottentots during the war, and seemed to take a pride in wreaking vengeance on those unfortunate women,” declared Noothout.

Shark Island is now the site of a modern hospital and a lighthouse. On the far side, away from the town, is the lagoon and the cluster of brightly painted bathing-boxes called Ostende. But I never see Shark Island without thinking of those walking skeletons

who left their bones in the parched sand.

They say that long residence in Luderitz, shut in between the desert and the sea, makes some people a little queer. Friends there told me that it was no use owning a motor-car because there was nowhere to go. It is no place for the sufferer from claustrophobia.

Nevertheless, one run outside the town is permitted and desperate inhabitants drive there every Sunday afternoon. This is the short trip to Diaz Point lighthouse and Halifax Island. If the headman is in a good mood he may row a few visitors across to the island and allow them to gaze upon the penguins. Halifax is one of those islands separated by a narrow channel from the shore. Families love it because, like Penguin, it is so close to

Luderitz that the children are able to come home for the week-end. Moreover, there is a telephone at the lighthouse not far away, so that medical emergencies are not feared.

The small house and wooden shacks, however, are reminiscent of earlier days on the islands. I roamed all over the few acres of craggy Halifax while the Gamtoos was loading a thousand bags of guano. It lacks the fascination of the lonely isles, though I can understand its appeal for married men who like to send into Luderitz for fresh meat every week.

Pomona Island, forty miles to the south, bears a strong resemblance to Halifax. It is so close to the shore that the headman could wade across at low tide but for the fact that he would find himself in a prohibited diamond area.

And like Halifax it is an island where penguins rule the roost.

The original Pomona, of course, is the largest island of the Orkney group off Scotland – a place of gales. Possibly some Orkney seaman visited this southern Pomona on a windy day and gave it the name.

Between Pomona and Halifax is the exposed reef called Long Island where, you may remember, Mister Milo killed a sea elephant. Although some of the seals prefer the sanctuary of the mainland, thousands cling stupidly to Long Island and every season thousands are killed by the hunters.

Long Island is conveniently situated for poachers from Luderitz, and it has to be guarded for weeks before the season opens. There is not even a hut

on the reef, so the watchmen have to live in an open boat moored in the channel between the reef and the shore.

Forty years ago a prospector working near the beach opposite Long Island heard queer sounds coming through a dense fog. It sounded like the bleating of sheep and the bellowing of cattle.

The prospector hastened back to Luderitz and reported that a ship with a cargo of cattle had gone on the rocks. It so happened that the steamer Linda Woermann was expected with livestock. A tug went to the rescue, taking Lloyds' agent and port officials. The rest of the population streamed overland in carts and donkey-wagons, while others rode camels.

When the fog cleared, only the seals were to be seen on Long island. The

roaring of the old bulls and the bleating of the pups had misled the prospector. Deeply disappointed, but thankful (one hopes) that no lives were in danger, the weary travellers turned homewards through the sand.

Chapter 13

OLD HANDS, OLD SHIPS

PANTHER HEAD has dropped astern, the Gamtoos has marooned the last of her human cargo, the decks are strangely silent, and Mister Milo is in thoughtful mood. It is easy to read his mind this afternoon as the Gamtoos butts the long southwest seas driving south for Table Bay.

“Yes, I’m thinking of all my old friends – the old island hands, all dead and gone,” admitted Milo. “Ships and skippers and men, all gone but me. That was my life, and I wasted it on that bloody island.”

“They were a good crowd Milo, and you were glad to have known them – perhaps it was the best life for you after all?”

“Well, maybe ... I still don’t know.”

“Plenty of them stuck it out for years – even college men like John Merrylees. What sort of fellow was Merrylees?”

“He was a big man with a moustache – oh, an educated man all right. Good family, too. You know what Merrylees was in London? A tea merchant. He knew how to blend tea, old Merrylees, and he used to bring his own tea to the island. Stuff we got in the rations was too harsh for his palate, he said. If only he had stuck to tea ...”

I gathered that Merrylees had gone bankrupt in London through not sticking to tea and had sailed for the Cape. That was towards the end of last century. He heard about the islands as soon as he landed in Cape Town, and took the job to get away from the drink.

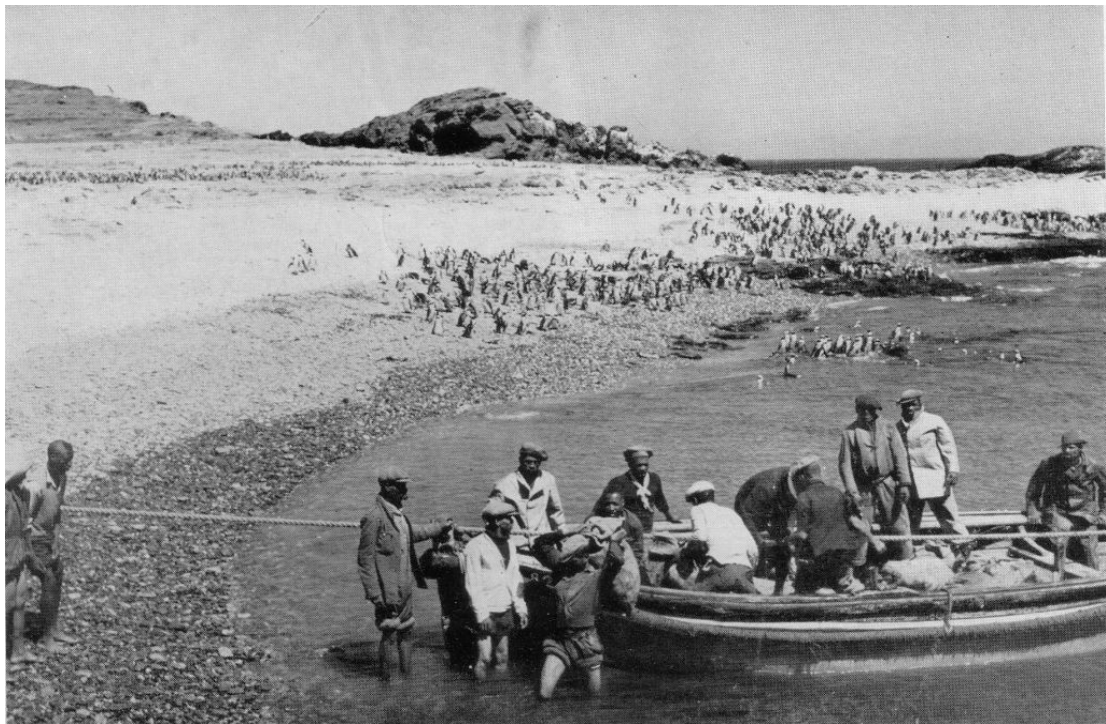
Halifax Island became his home for many years. He had a large library in his hut, the London "Times" and "Punch" were delivered at intervals, and there were often visitors from Luderitz to break the monotony. The Germans brought beer and took penguin eggs in exchange: and as Merrylees never became an obstinate teetotaler this arrangement suited him very well.

Merrylees kept a visitors' book on the island. Among the signatures were those of two ill-fated admirals – first Rozhdestvenski in 1904, and ten years later Graf von Spee. Documents in the departmental files reveal that Merrylees himself had a copper-plate handwriting, and his reports were very different from the uneasy scrawls submitted by other headmen.

On the beach opposite Halifax Island there is a board bearing this inscription:

In Memory of George Pond
of London
August 1902
Aged 51
Died of Hunger
and Thirst

Merrylees found George Pond dying on that beach. For some reason which I have never been able to discover, Pond had been run out of Luderitz without food or water – forcibly expelled and told to seek shelter on one of the islands. He must have been in a bad way, for the march of a few hours through the desert under the sun to Halifax was too much for him. Merrylees buried him on the beach, and put up a board stating that he had



On the beach at Halifax Island, near Luderitz

been “abandoned by the inhabitants of Luderitz”.

When the Germans saw that board they destroyed it. Merrylees was ready for them. Again and again he rowed across with new symbols of defiance recording the manner of George Pond’s tragic death. Today the board has weathered so that it is impossible to read the full inscription, but I think Merrylees had the last word.

That was Merrylees – stubborn, clinging in exile to fragments of a comfortable past, spending his leave riotously in Cape Town every year, ending his days in a Salvation Army home. One of Mister Milo’s friends, one of the old hands.

Scotty Horne was another. He was Milo’s right-hand man on Ichaboe for years: a man who had taken a science

tripos at Cambridge. His fondness for port wine was famous; so were his paintings. He used, the paint supplied for boats and buildings, and canvas from the island store. For a few bottles of port he would settle down to a picture of any ship loading guano at the island; and he painted in the manner seamen loved, with great accuracy of detail. No need to inquire how a man of his education had come to the islands. Horne and Merrylees had the same failing, and it kept them on the islands almost until they died.

While the de Pass firm leased the northern islands the old hands lived on sailing-ship rations and fared well enough to keep in good health. When the Cape Government took charge of the working of the islands in June 1895, a Captain C. H. Jackson was appointed government agent, with the

aged Captain Spence as his assistant. Both received commission on the guano collected, and before long rumours went round the Table Bay waterfront that the men on the islands were suffering under the new regime.

It was not until July 1897, however, that the scandal found an outlet in print. Then a correspondent in the “Cape Times” reported that scurvy had appeared among the labourers and demanded an official inquiry.

At once there was a flood of letters supporting the demand. “Nemesis” declared: “Nowhere under God’s sun have men been so badly treated. I shipped for the islands with forty or fifty others – men of all classes who could not find work in Cape Town. From the day we landed on Ichaboe until the Sea Bird called for us four months later we did not have one

square meal, except when we killed a young penguin or caught crawfish. Of medicine we had absolutely nothing, and men unused to humping full sacks of guano, whose feet bled from the continual chafing of their moccasins, had to rub guano over their sores. During the whole four months the fresh vegetables served out consisted of one issue of three potatoes a man.

“During the third month the fresh water was nearly finished, and half the men went over to Post Office Bay on the mainland, leaving the sick and less robust on Ichaboe with enough fresh water to keep them alive. The men on the mainland slept in the whaleboat, under an awning of guano sacks. For sixteen days each man’s daily allowance was one handful of mealie meal and one pint of water from a water-hole inland. Then the schooner took all

hands back to Cape Town looking gaunt and haggard. The mate, John Kaupper, harpooned a porpoise, which was given to the diggers to eat. Never again do I wish to see such a ravenous scramble as was made for the under-cooked porpoise flesh. Maritime Cape Town has known these facts for some time past, and thank God that you have given them publicity at last.”

Another old hand wrote: “ One man, sick of his surroundings, determined to walk down the coast to Port Nolloth. His bleached bones were picked up later abreast Sinclair’s Island. The men on Mercury Island, having no water, came over to the mainland and walked for three days before they struck a water-hole. If seamen’s curses could kill the officials responsible, they would have been dead men long ago. ‘Let the beggars rot’ is the maxim

of the Cape Government. But now the truth is out and justice will be done to a hearty and plucky lot of sailors and sealers. In the days of Daniel de Pass the men were treated fairly well, but since the government took over they have made the islands a hell on earth.”

Things were just as vile on board the government schooner Sea Bird. Two seamen went to the “Cape Times” office and handed in this letter:

“In the least sea the water runs through the fo’c’s’le, and having stood out our watch on deck we are compelled to go to sleep in a damp bunk. The place is bad enough to break any, man’s health. My eyes are so bad that I am not fit to go to sea. I got that only through the draught in the fo’c’s’le. The food we are getting consists only or mostly of salt meat and biscuits. The bread is so bad that only the

greatest hunger could compel a man to eat it. If the government agent comes on board he won't speak to common sailors. We can't even get the money due to us. Are we slaves with whom our masters can do what they like?"

Captain Burr, master of the Sea Bird, had resigned while this storm was blowing up, and a "Cape Times" reporter found him at the Sailor's Home in Cape Town. He confirmed that scurvy had appeared on the islands, and also the absence of medicines.

"A German passenger from Angra Pequena died on board the Sea Bird owing to the lack of the usual remedies carried on board ship," said Captain Burr. "The islands are rough and rocky, and the men are always falling, bruising and cutting themselves. Once I asked for lint and got

half a yard. I have known the supply of so-called fresh vegetables to be three fourteen-pound tins of potatoes for a whole island and four cases of beef to last four months."

Captain Burr produced extracts from the Sea Bird's log showing that all the men on Ichaboe had refused duty owing to shortage of food. On Possession Island the scurvy was so serious that one man never recovered the use of his limbs, and had to be sent back to Cape Town. In February 1897, the men on Ichaboe struck work owing to the bad food and the long hours of work. There was no clock on the island, and the men were being worked beyond the regulation hours.

"I had boils myself, and my mate in the Sea Bird could not bend his head," went on Burr. "There is a man in hospital now who came down with me

in the Sea Bird. He was weak when he came on board, and as the only place he could find to sleep was on top of the guano in the hold, he got worse. We had to leave a space to let the man lie between the deck and the top of the manure. Diggers receive fifty shillings a month and their food. The government by some means picks up men in Cape Town who cannot get anything else to do and sends them to the islands.”

Captain Burr said that during the sealing season the men’s wages were reduced to thirty shillings a month, but they received a bonus of two pence a skin, so that they really made about £2 a month extra. One man went to the office in Cape Town to draw his pay and was refused. He pulled out a revolver and would have shot Captain Spence if Burr had not intervened.

The headman of Mercury, stated Burr, was a fine man named Andrew Hanssen. His privations had driven him mad, and when he embarked in the Sea Bird he scraped the decks all day, thinking that he was still collecting guano. On arrival in Cape Town he had vanished and the police had searched for him in vain.

On most of the islands the diggers lived in crazy wooden shanties which Burr described as “more like huge, flimsy coffins than houses”. The bunks were shelves, with just room to squeeze in. Cooking was done in the open.

“Scurvy is almost unknown now under the British flag,” said Burr finally. “It has been left to the Cape Government to keep it alive.” .

At the Sailors' Home the "Cape Times" reporter also found an educated man named T. A. Dyke. He was pale, thin and limping. Dyke and about forty other island labourers had sailed in the Sea Bird and slept in the holds on top of the water casks and provisions, with bags of biscuits as pillows.

"It took a week to reach Halifax," related Dyke. "There each man got a chunk of beef or pork for the day. Breakfast consisted of cracker-hash or mealie pap. For dinner there was soup and biscuits. The house was just a log-cabin with rotten walls and a hole cut in the roof for ventilation. Old guano bags were used for bedding. The drinking water stank and turned a queer blue colour. Our only medicines were castor oil and cattle salts. I have drenched a cow at home with the same

kind of salts often. The first week I was not accustomed to carrying the sacks, and before long my back was red flesh. It was a case of suppressed mutiny among the men all the time. The headman was an ignorant man who could not read or write. When the rows began he told one of the men to read the articles of agreement to us."

Here was clear evidence, though the "Cape Times" published it at the risk of a libel action. In a leading article the newspaper summed tip: "A prima facie case has been made out which it would be folly for the government to ignore or burke. There has long been a smouldering suspicion that the administration of the guano islands called for drastic reform."

The "Cape Times" also pointed out that Captain Jackson had been drawing up to £2,000 a year, and Captain

Spence £800. The government could not ignore this outburst. Mr. T. Graham, a barrister, was appointed chairman of a commission of inquiry and in July 1897 he sailed for the islands in the little government steamer Pieter Faure. He was accompanied by Mr. C. Currey, under-secretary for agriculture, Dr. A. J. Gregory, Dr. Gilchrist and a shorthand writer. Captain Jackson was refused a passage. He had been denouncing the letter-writers as "discontented scoundrels", and Mr. Graham felt that his attitude towards complaints made his presence undesirable.

Never was a voyage of inquiry more fully justified by the facts. The Pieter Faure, indeed, became a relief ship and Dr. Gregory was kept hard at work from the moment the commissioners landed at Possession Island.

Thirteen of the fourteen men on Possession were down with scurvy, many of them lying in their bunks too weak to walk. No fresh provisions were to be seen, and there was a shortage of firewood. Five serious cases were ordered back to Cape Town. It was the same tale wherever the Pieter Faure anchored. The men at Halifax had received some help from the Germans on the mainland; but their drinking water and huts were exactly as Dyke had stated. Morello, the Sicilian headman, also fitted the description.

On Ichaboe the scurvy-stricken diggers were existing on a diet of barley water, bread and tea, "a nauseous beverage with nothing to recommend it but its cheapness", according to Mr. Graham's report.

Mr. Graham also discovered that Captain Burr had reported the complaints, but that nothing had been done. Anthony Chimato, one of the best headmen on the coast, had demanded fresh vegetables and onions for his men, and had been dismissed after nineteen year's service.

As a result of the scurvy, five thousand tons of guano were lying on the islands exposed to wind and weather.

Captain Jackson was summoned before the commission when the Pieter Faure returned to Cape Town. He put the blame on Captain Burr, and declared that he had spent many a sleepless night thinking of the poor fellows on the islands running short of water. Burr had not handed over the lime juice and fresh provisions as he should have done.

"Burr insisted upon selecting the men himself," stated Jackson. "Burr was the only person to introduce broken-down gentlemen and loafers to the islands."

Captain Burr then gave evidence. He had been at sea for fourteen years, he said, and his salary was £12 a month. The Sea Bird was the worst ship for living he had ever known. She called four or five times a year at the islands, and he had to drive her hard to keep up to time. That was why she leaked so much. He denied Jackson's allegations.

Mr. Graham finally reported that the men had not received sufficient wholesome provisions. There was no medical examination of diggers, and many of them had never done manual labour in their lives before. He had found conditions on the islands

deplorable. He condemned the system under which Captain Burr, master of the Sea Bird, was also responsible for the work on the islands. Captain Jackson, he reported, had not visited the islands for twenty years, "I found a desire to conceal the true state of affairs from the government," added Mr. Graham.

Captain Jackson emerged from the inquiry as a tyrant and a bully. Long after the islands had been taken over from the government he had refused to conform with Civil Service rules and methods; and he was so quick to take offence that he had been allowed to have his own way. His letters were filled with biting sarcasm. It was shown that on one occasion a British naval captain had landed on Ichaboe and made a casual inquiry about the food; and Jackson had complained to

the Admiral at Simonstown that his authority was being undermined.

Farmers declared that Jackson was rude and domineering when they applied for guano. Mr. Charles Currey, the secretary for agriculture, reported that Jackson was unwilling to accept any measure of official control. Jackson kept him in the dark, and his attitude was unfriendly. It was not surprising to find that the government dispensed with his services not long after the inquiry.

At this period the boat work, sealing and some of the guano collecting was done by white men, but Hottentots from the mainland were also employed. They, too, suffered heavily under the Jackson regime, and their hardships came to light during the inquiry.

As the Hottentots were German subjects, the German authorities drew up regulations in August 1896 and informed Captain Burr. They wished to know how many Hottentots were being engaged and the rates of pay; and it was laid down that all Hottentot labourers must be discharged at Angra Pequena. Until then, Burr and his predecessors had been dumping the time expired Hottentots, including their women, on the desert coast opposite the island where they had been working. Hottentots were supposed to know all the water-holes and find their way back home on foot. In spite of their desert lore, however, several Hottentots perished on these long journeys in the wilderness, while others reached Angra Pequena at their last gasp and begged for water.

Burr reported the new regulations on his return to Cape Town, but Captain Jackson told him to ignore the Germans and carry on as before. So he engaged Hottentots without informing the Germans, paid them in clothing, rice and coffee instead of the fifteen shillings a month to which they were entitled, and left them to walk home as usual.

Some months later, when Burr took the Sea Bird into Angra Pequena, he went on shore and found a file of marines from the German gunboat Hyena waiting for him. After two days in gaol, however, he signed an agreement promising to observe the regulations in future; and then the Germans released him. Again acting on Jackson's instructions, Burr discharged more Hottentots on the mainland. So next time the Sea Bird sailed

into the lagoon the Germans were ready for him.

“We launched the whale-boat, and when abreast of the pier the German military lieutenant blew his whistle,” wrote Burr in his logbook. “I could see heaps of soldiers running from the guard-house to the shore. Three times the lieutenant called on me in English to stop. I took no notice and then they opened fire. We got back to the schooner in safety, at once heaved the anchor and removed the Sea Bird to British waters close to Penguin Island.”

After that incident a German lieutenant visited all the islands and gave each headman a document to sign so that there would be no more breaches of the labour regulations. He informed the headmen that they would all be much better off when Germany took

over the islands. The Germans also complained officially to the Cape Government, and Sir Gordon Sprigg, the Premier, gave instructions that Burr was to be reprimanded. Very few Hottentots remained on the island after that incident. The recruiting of Cape coloured men dates from that time.

For some years after the scandal magistrates were sent to inspect the islands. I found the report of Mr. J. Cleverly, the Walvis Bay resident magistrate, who stepped on shore at Ichaboe from the coaster Gertrud Woermann in June 1901, just as the men were sitting down to breakfast.

It was a contrast with the starvation days. “A good hot stew was being served, with well-cooked curry and rice to follow,” wrote Mr. Cleverly. “It was placed on the mess tables in a

clean and decent manner. All the men were cheerful and contented.”

Here is an extract from the report of Mr. F. Truter, who inspected Possession in 1905: “It would be a great boon if the government would supply the men with draught-boards and cards, and more illustrated papers such as ‘Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday’ instead of ‘Chambers’s Journal’. I found the galley clean, and the newly baked bread was excellent. The headman had fresh potatoes and onions in stock. Lime juice was issued as often as desired. The sun condensers supply one hundred gallons of fresh water a week.”

Mr. Truter went on to Ichaboe and gave a list of the men there – typical of the cosmopolitan crowd of old hands. This was the list: E. Barbieri, headman (Italian), F. Abbott, cook (English),

W. Ludvigssen, digger (Norwegian), W. Hankey (Cape coloured), A. Briggs (Irish), W. Campbell (Scotch), G. Bell (Cape coloured), L. Carlo (Italian), J. Farquhar Darkyn (West Indian negro), J. McKluchney (Scotch), G. Sylvester (St. Helena coloured), G. Engstrom (Russian Finn), W. Berry (English), C. Cass (English), H. Burgest (St. Helena coloured), W. Forth (Irish), D. Rosario (Italian), R. Burns (Scotch), J. O’Brien (Irish).

Rates of pay quoted by Mr. Truter were £5 to £10 a month for headmen, £3 for cooks and £2 for the ordinary diggers: On unpopular Mercury Island the diggers received an extra ten shillings a month – for obvious reasons.

There was another official visit to the islands, headed by Mr. J. Searle,

M.L.A., in 1907 to investigate working costs. It had been suggested that convict labour might be used. Captain Spence, the gun-runner, was still alive and supervising the islands; and he opposed the scheme. "At some of the islands they would be away with the boats," he declared. "Besides, you must have white men for the sealing – it is frightfully rough work."

Captain Spence said that he had once tried a tonnage system. The pay of a labourer was cut to thirty shillings a month, and they were rewarded according to results. Some men made £60 during that season. He stopped it, as the men were liable to pick up anything to make weight.

Another official told the commission that it cost about five shillings a day, pay and food, to keep a labourer on the island. Each man picked up less than

one bag of guano a day. It was a laborious, monotonous task. The men were getting plum pudding once a week, while headmen enjoyed such luxuries as sauces and butter.

When the commission reached Ichaboe, one of the diggers informed Mr. Searle: "No father living could be as good to his children when ill as our headman, Mister Milo. We are proud to be serving under him."

The whole system nowadays is as neat as a government file, and if the islands have lost some of the rollicking atmosphere, they are certainly more comfortable.

Notorious characters are no longer recruited as headmen. Possibly the last effort in that direction was made when John Garnsworthy was appointed headman of Plumpudding Island.

Garnsworthy was one of the leaders of the revolution which flared up in 1922 along the Witwatersrand. With a number of other men he was tried on a charge of murdering eight mine officials and special police. He was sentenced to death, but this was commuted to life imprisonment and after only two years he was released. No doubt the job on Plumpudding Island was devised to get him out of the way. He went there with his wife and daughter, and stuck it for eighteen months. After this more or less mild penance he returned to the world as caretaker of the Pretoria post office.

The only unusual recruit I heard about in recent years was a bearded religious fanatic who had devoted his life to preaching at street-corners. He lasted for two months and then returned thankfully to the cities.

I know that the old hands were disreputable and drunken. They had all the faults of old-time sailormen, and the sober island life merely gave them thirsts such as they had been accustomed to quenching at the end of every long voyage. They were superstitious, too, as a result of much thinking in their solitude. But I should have liked to have known them as Mister Milo knew them. They were his friends, he relied on them, and in moments of danger in the surf or on the sealing-ledges they never let him down.

Most celebrated of all the ships that carried the old hands to the guano islands was the schooner Sea Bird. Her name has cropped up often enough in this narrative, and now you must stand on her scrubbed decks and study her.

I was only a schoolboy when I saw the white hull of the Sea Bird in Table Bay Docks, and then she was nearing the end of a long career. Sailormen agree that she was the finest schooner ever seen in South African waters.

Built in Falmouth in 1874, she had the lines of a yacht and a beautiful sail plan. Her tonnage was 117, but on sealing expeditions she often carried seventy men packed into her saloon, holds and fo'c's'le. Captain Charlie Towns, a gaunt Scot, was her first master; he remained with her until he was white-haired; he nursed her on occasion, but most of the time he drove her as no man after him dared to do.

In spite of gales and fogs, depending entirely on her sails, Sea Bird served the islands for forty years without ever touching a reef. She had a smart crew,

they had to be smart, for that was a period when masters used their fists.

Captain Hansen, who took over from Towns, committed suicide. (I found his grave on Possession Island.) Then came Captain Alfred George Murton, a fine old adventurer who often took his family to sea with him. His son, Mr. R. A. Murton (now 77 years old), gave me some of his early memories of his father and the Sea Bird.

“My father was one of those old-time sailormen who would sooner fight than have their breakfast, as the saying goes,” declared Mr. Murton. “He came to the Cape in an East Indiaman, the Burlington, in 1859, and his first job was at Cape Point, where he helped to build the lighthouse. That same year my father rigged the tackle that landed the first railway locomotive ever seen in Cape Town.

“Then he went to sea again. He was an able seaman in Stephan’s schooner Jonquil, one of the few ships that rode out the great gale of 1865 in Table Bay safely. Not long afterwards he took command of a cutter in the guano trade – the Albert Edward Prince of Wales.”

Captain Murton remained in this ship for some years. When the Table Bay Docks were opened in 1870, the first ship to enter was the brig Etienne, the second was the barque South Easter, and then came the Albert Edward with Mrs Murton at the wheel. Among the ships lost in the 1865 gale was H.M.S. Galatea, a wooden frigate. A new ship was built from the shattered wreckage, the thirty-ton cutter Volunteer. She was a box, no shape at all, but she sailed to the guano islands for twenty

years. Captain Murton was her skipper for a time.

“My father would tackle anything,” said Mr. Murton, “He went after diamonds and gold, and brought nuggets home with him. He worked on the Namaqualand copper mines. Once he took charge of an expedition into South-West Africa, years before the Germans arrived, and rescued a number of Boer trekkers who were in difficulties. He was an ivory trader, supplying the Ovambos with blunderbusses and sending them out after elephants. I was with him, in 1879 as a boy of six. My earliest memory is of a huge forest fire in the wilds of South-West Africa, with all the animals in creation racing out on to the plains.

“But my father always went back to sea after a spell on shore. I remember the Sea Bird all right, she was built to

last for ever. I slept in one of the bunks in her polished mahogany saloon. My father had her at the end of last century and spent two years in her sealing and serving the guano islands.”

I had another first-hand account of life in the Sea Bird from Mr. C. F. Granger, son of the Mr. Robert Granger who worked the islands in the middle of last century.

“Both my parents passed over when I was very young and I am now over eighty,” explained Mr. Granger. “In 1892 I was privileged to accompany Captain Spence on a tour of inspection of the islands in the Sea Bird. We took up a lot of men of all nationalities to work for the season – dead-beats many of them such as those one used to meet in the early days on the goldfields. One grey-haired old chap Captain Spence pointed out to me had spent

fifty years on the island. His custom was to allow his pay to accumulate. After several years, when he thought he had enough, he would take a holiday in Cape Town, hand over all his funds to the owner of some shebeen, and launch out on a royal spree which only ended when the money was finished. Then he would return penniless to the islands. Among these men was a sprinkling of deep-sea sailors, but one man had been a bank manager. Captain Spence also told me that he had decided to leave three white men on all the larger islands. Previously he had left two men, and tragedies had occurred. The noises of the birds at nightfall and early morning, when the Sea Bird was at anchor, resembled a city.”

Sea Bird sailed out of Table Bay on the last sealing-trip of her long career

in September 1912, bound for the lonely isles of the “roaring forties”. Six months passed, and Captain Hystad and his crew of twenty-one men had not returned. A steam whaler was sent into the Southern Ocean to search for them, and found some living as castaways on Prince Edward Island, others on Marion thirteen miles away. All but two had survived the Antarctic winter, living in caves, eating sea elephant meat and penguins.

But the Sea Bird had been lost on Prince Edward. She had dragged her anchor in a gale and struck a rock off shore. The schooner that had survived all the vicissitudes and dangers of the guano isles had gone down at last.

Among the island skippers, the men who Spent their lives in the guano trade, one of the most skilful was

Scotty Clarke. He served for sixteen years in the Volunteer – two as able seaman, two as mate and twelve as master. Later on, as inspector of guano islands, he made many a voyage in the Sea Bird.

A small, red-haired man with a jolly face, he could spin a yarn like a true sailor ; and the pity of it is that no one ever wrote down a word of his life of adventure. Like Murton and others, Scotty Clarke often ventured into the unexplored country beyond the “Coast of Dead Ned”; and he always maintained that diamonds would be found there.

His son Johnny Clarke followed him into the guano trade and was inspector of the islands for many years. I am sorry that I missed both of them. Scotty and Johnny are still remembered on the islands.

Scotty Clarke and most of the old-time skippers held no certificates as master mariners. They rose to command by force of personality; their weather lore was almost infallible; they knew the currents and all the hazards of the grim west coast; they were like those vastly experienced, old-fashioned family doctors; whose sensitive hands often told them more than instruments reveal to the modern general practitioner. “Scotty” Clarke would have laughed at radar and distrusted it profoundly. But when he nosed his way round Mercury in pea-soup fog, he knew exactly where he was going. And it was done under sail, which increased the risk enormously.

Many of the old island skippers have been forgotten, but there were some too vivid for oblivion. Such a man was Harry Christophersen, a six-footer

weighing fifteen stone and agile as a cat. As a young man he had lost his left hand, but he wore a hook like a pirate. That fixed Harry Christophersen for the benefit of posterity.

I have already mentioned the Table Bay gale in 1865 – that historic gale which drove one mail steamer and seventeen sailing-ships on to the rocks. Christophersen was skipper of the fifty-ton cutter Ruby, and he was on shore drinking when the gale blew up. He swore that nothing would stop him getting back to the Ruby, and at the risk of his life he did. Then he made sail, tacked away from the deadly lee shore, worked her up the bay against the mountainous seas, and finally cleared the land and rode out the gale in open water.

The same gale brought Captain Johann Parow to the Cape. His ship, the

Prussian schooner Kehrweider, survived the gale; but Parow left her and took command of guano island schooners. A nephew, Captain Heinrich Parow, joined him in 1889; and this second Parow, a former German naval officer, spent twenty-five years as master of coasting steamers between Swakopmund and Table Bay.

Heinrich Parow was an unlucky skipper. He once told me that he did not blame the men who had made the charts; it was just that the "Coast of Dead Ned" was one of the most notorious sea routes in the world. The fogs were his undoing. He lost the Gertrud Woermann near Swakopmund in 1904 and the Eduard Bohlen nine years later.

Another German skipper who was well known on the islands was Captain H. L. Scharmberg, a short, stout man.

He took charge of the 216-ton coasting-steamer Nautilus in 1900, carried troops and stores during the South African War and supplies for the German forces during the native wars early this century. When the diamond fever was running high at Luderitz, the Nautilus landed eager prospectors along the desert coast. Captain Scharmberg never lost a ship. He retired in 1917 and managed a crawfish factory at Hoetjies Bay. As I have related, the Nautilus was wrecked on Possession in 1919 while dredging diamonds from the sea-floor.

Men had a sixth sense in those days. They stood their watches out in the open, with not even a canvas dodger to screen them from the spray. Always the wind was on their unshaven cheeks. They felt every change, they could smell the coast, and they could

hardly fail to smell the islands. The inaccuracies on their charts could be measured by miles, literally miles.

But they knew the islands, a whole strange world of knowledge was theirs, and much of it was lost when they departed. In the sailing days and long afterwards, much guano was carried by the fleet of the Stephan brothers – a legendary name on the west coast. The firm once held the lease for Dassen Island and the Lambert Bay islet, paying the Cape Government £2,000 a year for the right to collect penguin eggs and guano.

Their ships traded as far away as the United States, famous ships with great seamen in command. One I knew, Captain G. von Zweigbergk, a Swede, had a strange sense of humour and made history during a voyage from

Table Bay to Baltimore in the eighties of last century.

The barque Venita, condemned as unseaworthy after being dismasted and battered in a gale, was put up to auction. Von Zweigbergk bid £65 on behalf of the Stephans and got her. He retained a one-third share in the venture and fitted out the Venita so well that she became a smart ship. There was a cargo of guano waiting for her, and von Zweigbergk signed on a crew.

He found fourteen seamen who could play musical instruments. Every day before the Venita sailed the men could be heard rehearsing with flute and drum, violin, cornet and trombone. Von Zweigbergk attended a sale of gaudy military uniforms and tricked out his ship's company in bright scarlet. To the delight of the Table

Bay waterfront, the Venita sailed away with the uniformed band playing.

When the Chesapeake Bay pilot boarded the Venita he was amazed to see what appeared to be a squad of soldiers lined up on deck.

“What sort of guys you got here, cap’n?” inquired the pilot. “Kin they go aloft in this breeze?”

“Just watch,” replied Captain von Zweigbergk. “You’ll see what soldiers can do.”

They went aloft like the shellbacks they were, shortened sail, fell in again and played “Yankee Doodle” and “God Save the Queen”. The arrival of the Venita was the talk of the Baltimore waterfront that day.

The Stephan firm was started by an officer from a Dutch East India ship,

Johan Daniel Stephan, a man who liked the “Tavern of the Seas” so well that he settled down as a merchant in Bree Street very early last century.

His great-grandson, Colonel H. J. C. Stephan (twice Mayor of Cape Town) still goes to work every day in an office built on the original Bree Street site. This was also the family home of the Stephans for generations. Members of the family were buried in the grounds last century, and Colonel Stephan showed me a tombstone, unearthed recently, bearing the names of his great grandfather (born 1784, died 1855) and his grandfather Johan Caret Stephan (1812-1871).

Johan Carel Stephan was the founder of the Stephan fleet and the man who opened up trade with the guano islands and the isolated farmers along the Cape west coast. It started in a

small way, with a cutter which carried coffee to the farmers and returned with tobacco and other produce.

Prospects were so encouraging that in 1835 Johan Caret bought land on the shores of St. Helena Bay and extended his enterprise to the fishing industry. That year was a great snoek season; the fish they caught were salted and shipped to Mauritius in the first of the Stephan schooners. The schooner returned with a cargo of sugar. Already the Stepfans were on the way to wealth.

At the mouth of the Berg River, which runs into St. Helena Bay, there lived one of those old Boer patriarchs who flourished in solitude – Oom Theunis Smit. He owned a stock farm there of 100,000 morgen, and many shepherds and labourers lived along the river. Johan Carel Stephan and his sons

became friendly with Smit, and soon had a large carrying trade in their hands. Sea transport was cheaper than the ox-wagon journeys to Cape Town. Two villages grew up near the river-mouth – Laaiplek (meaning “loading place”) and Velddrift, where the river could be crossed in shallow water.

One of Johan Carel’s sons, Carl Stephan, became a celebrated character with boundless ambition. He regarded the whole west coast from the Orange River south to Table Bay as his sphere of influence; and he and his brother Henry Rudolph had agents everywhere. Fifty years after their father had entered the area, the Stephan brothers had eighty fishing-boats and more than six hundred men working for them on shore and afloat. Schooners, brigantines and barques were bought for the fleet.

Their finest schooner was the Maria Frederica, which voyaged not only to the guano islands but as far as Rio for coffee and Mauritius for sugar. Her master was a Filipino named Manie Fernandez.

Colonel Stephan told me that one night his father (Mr. Henry Rudolph Stephan) woke the family and announced: "The Maria Frederica has been lost with all hands – I do not know where, but I saw it in a dream."

The schooner had left Table Bay in a howling South-easter that afternoon, bound for St. Helena Bay. She never made port. Two years later timber found north of Saldanha was identified as wreckage from the Maria Frederica. The queer thing about this ship was that she had been found drifting off the Cape coast, abandoned by her crew, about ten years before her

disappearance. She was a Marie Celeste of Cape seas, and the mystery of her arrival was never solved. "She just blew in and blew out", was the way an old shellback put it to me.

Carl Stephan, nicknamed the "Wheat King", was a shrewd man at sea or on the farms where he bought so much produce. A wooden three-masted sailing-ship, the Nerie, was driven ashore in Table Bay, damaged and refloated. Carl was always at hand on such occasions and he snapped up the Nerie for next-to-nothing. After repairs had been made he sailed her up to the Berg River, waited for high spring tide, and piloted her safely over the bar.

For years the Nerie was Carl's headquarters on the river. Moored to the bank, she served as a grain store.

Fourteen clerks lived aft, and glorious dances were held on the poop.

During the South African War, when the daring Boer commandos were raiding the countryside within sight of Table Mountain, the British turned the Nerie into a fort. So many guns and sandbags were put on board that her back was broken, and she settled down on the river-bed. A fire in 1907 completed the destruction of this picturesque landmark.

The Stephans had a steam pinnacle on the river as far back as 1873, bringing down produce to the ships waiting at the mouth. During the early years most of the Stephan employees were Cape coloured men. The only foreigner at Laaiplek was a runaway Danish sailor named Nimb, who lived in a bulrush hut. But in 1880 Carl Stephen met another runaway sailor, Francesco

Carosini, who became commodore skipper of the Stephan fleet. Carosini engaged many Italian skippers and crews; so that today the Berg River villages are full of Carnessas and Donaggis, Novellos and Violas – all speaking Afrikaans, though the Italian language has not yet died out.

In the nineties of last century the Stephans bought their first steamers, the Aurora, and Luna. I believe the ninety-ton Luna traded along these shores longer than any other coaster. Built in Britain in 1893, she was still using her original boiler when Colonel Stephan sold her in 1943. Captain Zamudio, a tall Frenchman, was the Luna's master for many years. Apart from quiet coastal trading, the Luna was sometimes employed as a salvage ship. She rescued fierce bulls from the Portuguese mail steamer Lisbon off

Paternoster in 1910 – bulls which were being sent to the toreadors of Lourenco Marques. That was the memorable occasion when the sea was stained red with port wine and many full barrels floated ashore.

Once the Luna, which had been loading guano at the islet, was bottled up in Lambert Bay by a gale so severe that Captain Zamudio was unable to make for open sea. It appeared certain that the little ship would be sunk or driven on the beach; but before abandoning her, Zamudio laid out all his anchors. The lifeboat capsized in the surf and one man was drowned. When the storm passed, however, the crewless ship was still riding securely at anchor.

The Luna was certainly South Africa's oldest ship. She was lost mysteriously with all hands in January 1945 near

Hondeklip Bay. With her, I am told, went the man who had been chief engineer of the treasure ship Alfred Nobel.

Tallie, a ship's carpenter from Malta, settled at Laaiplek long ago and built many small craft for the Stephans. His grandsons are still at work there, planing, shaping oak ribs, caulking the modern motor-cutters. And the house-flag of Stephan Brothers, which has been flown on the river for more than a century, is still seen there as the fishing-boats race up to the canning-factory, holds filled with mackerel, pilchards, crawfish or snoek.

In the old days during lean times a fisherman might earn no more than £25 a year, and he contrived to live on it. Now, with an immense demand for pilchards and crawfish, many a fisherman makes £25 (and much more) in

one good week. The bulrush huts have gone, neat villas stand along the river.

Yet the old hands still remember those nights when the farm wagons came down to the sea for fish and outspan fires blazed round Laaiplek and Veld-drift. Nights when the Italians played their mandolines and sang their love-songs. Ghost ships sail these waters with bygone skippers on their poops. And over all looms the shadowy outline of the Nerie, with Carl Stephan walking her wooden decks.

Eighty years ago the hardy little topsail schooner Albatross put into Table Bay after a passage of seventy-eight days from Norway. She was the pioneer of a fleet that still sails the South African coast, a fleet that carried men to the islands for years and brought back the guano.

The owner of the 117-ton Albatross was Mr. Arndt Leonard Thesen, a Norwegian shipping man, who, owing to the declining fortunes of his little fleet of sailing-ships, had decided to start afresh in New Zealand. He had his wife and nine children with him, and his brother, Captain M. T. Thesen, was in command of the schooner.

Altogether there were twenty souls on board the Albatross, so the Thesens had to work their passage under extremely hard conditions. Food was rationed carefully, and all hands were feeling the strain of the long passage when Table Mountain rose over the horizon.

After three weeks in Table Bay the Albatross cleared for New Zealand. But for a gale off Agulhas, the Thesens would have reached New Zealand. However, the schooner had

to return for repairs, and thus the fortunes of the whole family were changed.

The old Cape Government offered Mr. Thesen a charter to carry military stores to Durban, and on a return voyage to Cape Town touched at Knysna, which impressed Mr. Thesen.

Prospects were so promising that the Thesens gave up all thought of settling in New Zealand. They sailed into the Knysna lagoon in the Albatross, and made their home in the village of only a few hundred people.

Several of the young Thesens tried their luck on the diamond fields, but those who remained at Knysna put the port on the map and established a flourishing timber and coastal shipping business. The Albatross Served them faithfully for a quarter of a

century. Then she was lost on Danger Point and replaced by the brig Ambulant.

Longevity became a tradition in the Thesen ships, as you will realize if you study the careers of the famous little coasters that followed the Albatross and Ambulant.

First steamer to fly the Thesen house-flag (white star on red background) was the Agnar. Built of iron in Norway, she was eleven years old when she arrived in Table Bay in 1895. Four times the size of the Albatross, she was lively enough in the heavy seas between Table Bay and Knysna.

Some called the Agnar the “Knysna mail packet”, but to her passengers she was known as the “Agony”. She was the finest coaster in Cape waters at

that time, she carried eighteen first-class passengers and thirty in the steerage.

She was sold to a Madagascar firm in 1934, and she was fifty-four years old when she vanished with all hands, like the Waratah, in the Indian Ocean. A cyclone must have finished the little ship that had weathered so many winter gales off the South African coast.

The Thesens bought their second steamer, the Ingerid, in 1900. Mr. Oscar Thesen, grandson of the owner of the Albatross and director of the line for many years, remember sailing in the Ingerid on her maiden voyage from Table Bay to Knysna. He told of a shipping depression early this century which became so severe that the Agnar and Ingerid were at times

reduced to carrying trippers round Table Bay.

Sometimes the Thesen family used the Ingerid as a private yacht, and steamed up to Saldanha Bay at week-ends with parties of friends on board. After the Albatross, the Ingerid seemed wonderfully luxurious.

And indeed she was a comfortable ship with her upholstered smoking-room and ladies' lounge on the promenade deck. The Ingerid was forty-nine years old when she was sold to Mauritius in 1931, but she only lasted two years in the new trade. Then she was rammed in harbour, cut in two and sunk.

Karataru, a 500-ton coaster, joined the Thesen fleet in 1913. She made one memorable voyage through the "roaring forties" to Kerguelen with

coal for the sealing-station there. Gutted by fire in 1921, she ended up as a jetty at a Saldanha Bay whaling station.

During World War I the Thesens acquired the smallest and largest steamers they had yet owned – the 139-ton Clara and the 1,019-ton Outeniqua. Officially classed as a steam-barge, Clara is a remarkable midget; and she gained the affection of one man so firmly that he refused promotion in order to stick to her. He is Axel Johanson, who joined the Clara as cook in 1901, became master in 1916, and remained in command until she was sold in 1946.

At 75, Captain Johanson knows the coast between Table Bay and Port Nolloth better than any other living man. He must have done that run of 280 miles about 1,400 times by now,

but he lost count years ago. He is still on that foggy run as master of the Swazi, a ship nearly twice the Clara's size, with the red band and white star of the Thesens on the funnel.

Most unusual of all the Thesen ventures was the purchase after World War I of the former cable-steamer, Sherard Osborn. She looked like a steam yacht with her white hull and clipper bows, and the Thesens intended to make a world cruise in her. Teak deck-houses and old-fashioned binnacle with brass dolphins were handsome touches, but her coal consumption, 40 tons a day, was ruinous, and the project was abandoned.

The Sherard Osborn was converted into a fishmeal and crawfish canning-factory. After many vicissitudes, she sailed back to Britain in 1937 to be

broken up, her last voyage being enlivened by a report of a mutiny. She was fifty-nine, the oldest ship under the South African flag.

Outeniqua, flagship of the fleet for many years, was once piled up high and dry on a coral reef in the Mozambique Channel for two months. She was salvaged, but a much later accident rendered her a constructive total loss, and in 1945 she was broken up on the beach at Walvis.

Between the wars the Thesens went back into sail by owning the three-masted auxiliary schooner Lars Riisdahl. She made many a fast passage and also sailed the desert coast to Sandwich Harbour for guano.

Thesen ships have been into every harbour between the Congo and the Red Sea. They have anchored off

distant Indian Ocean isles; and during World War II the Otavi carried a cargo of wool across to Brazil on the only transatlantic voyage ever made under the Thesen house-flag.

Mr. Oscar Thesen is the last member of the family in the shipping business, and in his office there are paintings, photographs, scale-models and souvenirs of more than twenty ships that have flown the Thesen house-flag. Wrecks have been rare. His pictures record eighty years of useful work along the South African coast.

He has the Agnar's bell, pictures of his own small yachts under sail, and a framed discharge from the American barque Moshulu in which he worked his passage as a seaman. There are many pictures of the Antarctic whalers for which his firm act as agents.

But the picture he prizes most of all is that of a small black painted schooner with a long jib-boom, stout rigging and the Norwegian flag flying at the main – the schooner Albatross that brought the Thesen family to the Cape eighty years ago.

Chapter 14

SALDANHA AND THE ISLANDS

SALDANHA BAY and its guano islands will give you almost any sort of adventure story you want, from encounters with savages and wild beasts to naval battles and sunken treasure. Captain Benjamin Morrell knew this bay; so did Semmes of the Alabama. The little Gamtoos comes here often.

On the chart of the Cape west coast Saldanha Bay stands cut like a note of interrogation. That is the shape of it, the curve measuring nine miles across; while the shank is the narrow lagoon eight miles long. Saldanha is the finest natural harbour in Africa.

Dassen Island, largest of all penguin colonies, lies thirty miles to the south of Saldanha. Just outside the entrance

is Vondeling Island but after a long search I am unable to tell you why the early Dutch should have named it "foundling," unless it reminded them of a baby on the doorstep. In the entrance, three miles wide, are Malaga's (richest in guano), Marcus and Justen islands. There are two more islands in the sheltered waters where the lagoon begins, Meeuw and Schaapen.

In the days of the Cape Colony these islands off the Cape coast were known as the "Colonial Islands" to distinguish them from the "Northern Islands" along the South-West African coast.

Although the bay has a Portuguese name it is doubtful whether the Portuguese explorers ever put in here. French seamen were probably the first white men to set foot on the shores of Saldanha, and they were certainly the

first to exploit the islands. They sailed these seas hard on the tracks of Diaz and Vasco da Gama; they sighted the Cape of Storms fifty years before Drake and sixty years before the Dutch. The French had mastered the art of dressing sealskins, and they were the pioneers of the South African export trade. All the early visitors recognized the bird islands as great poultry-yards where they could fill their provision lockers with eggs that would keep for weeks. But the French saw the wealth of the islands and carried off thousands of skins.

Augustin de Beaulieu, in 1620, wrote the first description of one of these bird islands. "The interior is nothing but sand, with bushes here and there, under which the penguins – bird; without wings – scrape holes and hatch their eggs," he said. "Rats and

harmless snakes abound, and there are a few chameleons and lizards. On the rocks by the sea there are great numbers of seals, which bleat like sheep, but which are very different from sheep in taste. For my part I could not eat them, any more than the penguins, though a quantity of them might be taken if one were at the pains. Most of the crew ate them and preferred them to bacon."

Etienne de Flacourt surveyed Saldanha in 1648, four years before van Riebeeck founded the first permanent settlement at the Cape. He anchored under the Isle aux Cormorans (now Meeuw Island) near a creek called L'Ause des Flamens (Riet Bay) "on account of the great number of big birds known as flamingoes that are generally seen there". He referred to the present Malaga's Island as Isle de

Sansy, “after a certain Sansy who came there in former days for the skins of seals “.

So when van Riebeeck sent his little yacht Goede Hoop to Saldanha in search of “gold, ambergris and musk” the skipper found bottles, tools, casks and a grave with a cross. On some of the islands were huts with whalebone frameworks covered with sealskins. And on Schaapen Island was a great heap of sealskins, nearly three thousand, so skilfully cured that only the top layer had suffered from the weather. It was a rich haul – but the Dutch settlers also regarded it as a plain warning that French interference in their new domains must be expected.

Sure enough the Hottentots reported some months later that a French ship had been at work in Saldanha Bay. A

party of soldiers was sent to investigate and found the French ship still there. She had loaded forty-eight thousand sealskins – a haul many times larger than the modern hunters ever secured in the most favourable season. Van Riebeeck tried to persuade members of the French crew to desert, not only to prevent the ship returning to France but also to learn the secrets of curing sealskins. The French captain was suspicious, however, and an armed guard of reliable men accompanied every boat to the shore. Nevertheless, van Riebeeck’s men found four Frenchmen marooned on one of the Saldanha isles as a punishment. However, these men did not know the secret.

Van Riebeeck had great faith in the sealing industry, and informed his directors in Holland that he hoped to

send home every year “sealskins of nearly the value of a ton of gold”. Some he sent to Japan, but the curing had been faulty and before long he was ordered to stop “because of the stench caused in the Company’s ships”.

For some time after that the seals were hunted only for their meat (used as food for the slaves), and the oil, which kept Cape Town’s lamps alight. The precious skins were worked up locally into shooting, bags and tobacco pouches.

One item from van Riebeeck’s diary is worth studying. “February 17, 1666. The skipper of the hooker *Gecroonde Haringh* ordered to bring us some of the white bird dung found on the islands in the mouth of Saldanha Bay. It is lying very thickly there and we are at present very much in need of it

for our large garden.” A later entry shows that the hooker returned to Table Bay fully laden.

It is clear that van Riebeeck was fully aware of the value of guano as a fertilizer. Why, then, were the islands allowed to remain undisturbed and unexploited – apart from the eggs and the sealing – for nearly two centuries after the voyage of the *Gecroonde Haringh*? History is silent on this problem.

Fear of French intentions led the Dutch East India Company to build a small fort and keep a garrison at Saldanha Bay. All through the records of the second half of the seventeenth century there are references to French visitors and the steps taken to assert Dutch sovereignty over Saldanha. Every day must have been an adventure for the handful of soldiers watch-

ing over the islands, the bay and the beautiful lagoon.

At first there were only a corporal and six men. Then two men were placed on each island – the first of the long line of island dwellers. Here is a sidelight from the archives: “We sent the corporal on Schaapen Island bread, pork, tobacco and brandy, as we could not know how long his men would have to remain there without food.”

One of van Riebeeck’s captains reported that Saldanha Bay was “as secure as any canal in Amsterdam”. He killed two whales there and boiled down the blubber on Schaapen Island, obtaining twenty casks of oil.

Possibly the strangest report to come from the Dutch company’s garrison at Oude Post described a raid by two lions which carried off five sheep from

the kraals. “Hearing the screams of the Hottentots, the men at once rushed to the spot and chased away the lions,” said the Company’s superintendent. “Two trap guns were set and one lion was killed. The other one did not dare to escape over the sandy downs, but swam to Schaapen Island and thence to the eastern shore. Eight sheep were missing from the island, and later the footprints of the lion were discovered and four dead sheep.”

For a long time a guard ship, the Bruydegom, was kept at Saldanha. Her name remains on the chart; an inlet near the present whaling-station is called Bruydegom’s Bay. One day she sailed up the lagoon to take on water at Oude Post and ran aground between Meeuw and Schaapen islands. Her skipper had disobeyed orders in venturing into these shallows. The

ship was so badly damaged that she could not be repaired, and her bones still rest in the sand on the floor of the lagoon.

Vondeling Island was also the scene of a wreck at this period. The yacht *De Voerman*, which had gone to Saldanha with supplies for the garrison, was thrown on shore there during the return voyage. Her crew blamed the yacht's poor sailing qualities. Two men and a wagon with eight oxen were sent to collect salvaged goods; but they found the yacht completely shattered and trekked back to the Castle with only a couple of two-pounder guns and some cordage.

Oude Post, a pleasant spot today with its springs and walled gardens, must have been appreciated by the Dutch soldiers of long ago – though their enjoyment was often disturbed by

rumours of French invaders. A seventeenth-century description of the scene gives an idea of the life of the garrison.

“Oude Post is a fine fruitful place abounding in game and different kinds of birds,” wrote de Cretzer. “The garrison have dug up a fine piece of land there which will in time reward them with crops of radishes, cress and peas. Both the Meeuw and Schaapen islands we found to be excellent nooks, being everywhere covered with wild sorrel and purslin. In my opinion they would during the rainy season be able to support three to four hundred sheep and make them excellently fat. The poles, to which are attached the arms of the company, are everywhere in good condition.”

Not long afterwards, however, a French ship entered the bay and

landed her men in fighting order. They pulled down the Dutch Company's flag, hoist their own, chanted "Vive le Roi de France", and then went off sealing. There was nothing the small garrison could do about it except report to the Castle in Cape Town. When the French had departed, however, a bold soldier cut down the wooden beacon they had left and used it for firewood.

Stone beacons bearing the Dutch insignia were built in 1676, as the previous beacons had not only been disturbed by the French but had also been knocked over by elephants. After that year, however, the French were too busy elsewhere to bother about Saldanha. The bay and the islands knew more than a century of peace. Then came the British fleet that took possession of the Cape.

Gulls breed on Schaapen and Meeuw – the long-winged gulls that love coastal waters and never venture far out over the deep sea. They are scavengers, and if they contented themselves with the refuse and shellfish of the beaches they would be left undisturbed on their islands.

Unfortunately the southern black-backed gull is a robber like the sacred ibis, a raider of penguin and gannet nests. It kills the young birds and carries off eggs; and where the menace is not tackled the gull increases at the expense of valuable guano birds. So a long war has been waged on these pirates with Schaapen and Meeuw islands as the battlefields. Years ago, when Scotty Clarke was in charge, poison was used. Scotty killed seven hundred gulls with poison; but the

birds grew cunning, took to the water and vomited up the bait.

After that setback the coloured people of a mission near Saldanha Bay were granted permits to collect the eggs. That is the present system. They go from nest to nest gathering eggs and killing the chicks. The eggs, with pale green shells and red yolks, taste very much like hen's eggs and make excellent pancakes. In view of the size, they are not expensive at five shillings a dozen.

Southern black-backed gulls have pure-white tails, the only member of the species in the southern hemisphere with this distinction. It may be observed from Cape Horn and the Falklands right across the Southern Ocean to New Zealand; but rarely will you find it breeding so close to civilization as it does on these two Saldanha Bay

islands. They are quarrelsome feeders with harsh voices which sometimes become human as they rise above the noise of a storm. In flight these gulls are as graceful as the albatross.

Hartlaub's gull, the South African form of the silver gull, also breeds on Meeuw and Schaapen. It is smaller than the blackbacked gull and has a pure white head and a narrow lavender ring round the neck when in breeding dress. This gull is not a serious enemy of the guano birds, but it receives no protection on the islands. The harmless terns or sea swallows also run the risk of losing their eggs when they nest on these islands. You may see that great traveller, the Arctic tern, among the gulls. It breeds near the North Pole and migrates as far south as the Antarctic. In the winter the petrels are regular visitors, from the

large black Cape hen down to the storm petrels, smallest of sea-birds.

Justen Island must have been equipped with davits for hoisting boats or stores in those early days; “jut” is the Netherlands word for davit. You can still see the stones marking the graves of the Meresteyn’s crew on the island, though she was lost nearly two and a half centuries ago.

More remarkable still, you can still find silver ducatoons (and very rarely gold ducats) washed up from the wreck during heavy weather. On calm days the penguins have been known to bring up coins in the beaks and deposit them in their nests. I do not know any other treasure island which gives up its wealth in this way.

The Meresteyn was outward bound for the Dutch East Indies when she sailed into Saldanha Bay one dark night to secure fresh vegetables for her scurvy-stricken sailors. They were short of water, too, and the salt meat had raised thirsts that all hands were eager to quench. In the narrow channel between Justen and the mainland the wind petered out.

On the south-west side of Justen, where the pancake rocks end and drop sheer into the sea, there is a cauldron known to the old Dutch as “de baklei plaats” – the fighting place. It is nearly always a battle there between the combers and the hard rocks, and even in calm weather the surge is ominous.

There the Meresteyn struck. Her high-pooped stern parted from the stricken hull. Not a boat was launched. Yet ninety-eight men and one black

woman, nearly half the ship's company, drifted on shore clinging to spars and other timber.

Her money chests lay fourteen fathoms down. For years the Dutch Company's high officials at the Cape thought wistfully of those ducatoons; and men were kept on Justen in the hope that some of the chests might be washed up. In 1728, twenty-six years after the wreck, English divers were engaged and sent from Devon to Saldanha to attempt salvage with the aid of a primitive diving-bell made of wood. All the coins they recovered, and all the ducatoons found on the island since then, would just about fill a tobacco pouch. The "fighting place" still guards its treasure.

Justen Island was invaded by dangerous button spiders (close relatives of the American "black widow" spider)

ten years ago. Bester, the headman, was the first victim, and he was ill for weeks. Labourer after labourer was bitten; and Mr. Price, the inspector, paid a special visit to the island to report on the situation. It was an entirely new thing; never before had spiders appeared on these islands. Yet twenty men were bitten on Justen Island that year. Mr. Price found button spiders under almost every stone he kicked aside. He sent for serum, and after that the men recovered quickly. They had been using permanganate of potash, and one man suffered more as a result of the drastic treatment than from the spider bite. Justen is only half a mile from the mainland and it seems that the spiders were blown across by a strong south-east wind.

Malaga's is the prize island of this group, as I have said; and to Malaga's, soon after the Ichaboe rush started, came scores of ships. It was the Ichaboe story on a smaller scale, much closer to civilization, but hectic enough while it lasted.

In spite of the winter rains, many thousands of tons of guano had accumulated during the centuries. By August 1844 there were three hundred ships at anchor in the landlocked bay, while thousands of men swarmed over all the islands – digging, fighting and dying for the sake of the “white gold” left by the gannets. Admiral Marshall had to put in here, too, with H.M.S. Isis to restore order. This time he was on sure ground, for the islands were British; and the government made every captain loading guano pay £1 a ton to the colonial treasury.

Cape Town talked of nothing but guano during the rush, and a weekly newspaper reflected this interest in the following verses:

*A thousand fine vessels are
ploughing the main,
With their white sails all spread till
their lofty spars strain;
But what are they seeking and
where are they gone?,
Attend to my lay and I'll tell you
anon,
There's an island that lies on West
Africa's shore
Where penguins have lived since
the flood or before,
And raised up a hill there, a mile
high or more.*

*This hill is all guano, and lately 'tis
shown*

*That finer potatoes and turnips are
grown,
By means of this compost than ever
were known;
And the peach and the nectarine,
the apple, the pear,
Attain such a size that the gardeners stare,
And cry, 'Well! I never saw fruit
like that 'ere!'
One cabbage thus reared, as a
paper maintains,
Weighed twenty-one stone, thirteen
pounds and six grains,
So no wonder guano celebrity
gains.*

The rediscovered guano, which apparently had not been used at the Cape since van Riebeeck's day, was tested in various soils. In January 1844 the "South African Commercial Advertiser" reported: "Land which was

formerly a waste is now covered with pretty cottages and gardens. A revolution in rural economy is at hand. This concentrated manure can be laid on the land cheaper than common manure from the farmer's own stable. It has produced sixty-four beautiful potatoes on one stem, and it increases the yield of other vegetables from four to twenty times."

Chapter 15

BEYOND THE CAPE OF STORMS

YOU CAN be marooned just as effectively within sight of civilization and feel as lonely as you would on more distant islands. The last outposts on this island voyage lie scattered along the coast beyond the Cape of Good Hope, that great promontory that Diaz called the “Cape of Storms”.

Seal Island first, a rock in False Bay only five miles from Muizenberg, the most sophisticated seaside resort in South Africa. On the island, however, you are much closer to nature.

Sometimes there are ten thousand seals on Seal Island, although the whole area is only one acre – an acre of rock sloping up to fifty feet above sea-level. Here is the one-roomed stone hut where the labourers live for a

month each year. In heavy weather, new hands are frightened almost out of their wits, for the seas sweep over the rock to the front door.

The seals, having no fear of salt water, prefer the low northern end. In sheltered places you find the penguins, poking their heads out of crevices in the hard granite. Duikers roost on the outer rocks. And by way of variety there are dozens of pelicans, nesting on the island and flying over to the mainland each day in search of fresh-water fish.

Seal Island is much smaller than Mercury, and even the coloured labourers have felt the strain of exile on the waterless rock so close to the lights of the busy world. Some have been drowned while attempting to reach the mainland on rafts; but two men who used empty water-barrels

managed to evade the man-eating sharks and came through the surf to the beach safely.

I do not know how long I could stand the Robinson Crusoe life of Seal Island, but a man who was stationed there for two months as a wartime radar technician told me that he did not regret a minute of it.

He had three companions. One of them considered it the finest job he had ever had, simply because he did no work at all. They occupied the stone hut and made themselves comfortable by adding a wooden floor, a stable door, and some Perspex for a window. When fresh provisions failed to arrive they lived on penguin eggs, bully beef, potatoes, ships' biscuits and tea. All the fresh water had to be filtered as the drums had previously contained oil.

"I spent hours studying the marine life in the shallow pools," this exile informed me. "Having selected a few anemones I fed them for days on mussels, and watched their amazing growth in comparison with other anemones which found their own food. In spite of my own meagre diet I felt much fitter when I left and I was able to grow a beard without embarrassment."

Seal Island, with its huge slabs of smooth rock, is an ideal place for scraping guano. In a good year, when there have been no heavy rains, it has yielded 160 tons. Pedro Fernandez, one of the Manila fishermen who settled on the shore of False Bay last century, held the guano contract for years. When he died in 1933 his daughter Sophia took over the whole enterprise. She arranged my visit and

accompanied the fishing-cutter to the island to see how her brothers were getting on with the work.

The landing was almost more exciting than Hollam's Bird, for I had to jump from the dinghy on to a flat rock that was seldom left uncovered by the sea. After that it was a scramble to avoid the oncoming sea. I was comforted by the fact that Sophia's brother Cyril was close at hand. Cyril Fernandez is a champion swimmer who has saved fifteen lives. But he had a narrow shave himself one day when he lost his oars off Seal Island and swam after them. He was soon surrounded by seals; bulls, females and pups playing with him, as he said, "like kittens with a ball of wool". They meant no harm, but he found the game a bit too rough. They lifted him out of the water, rolled over him and jumped on him. For

fifteen minutes he clung to the oars and endured this situation until the men on shore were able to throw a rope.

Seal Island was a scene of tragedy among the seals in May 1949, for the adults deserted the island leaving fully a thousand pups to starve. Within a few days it became inevitably an island of death. Every pool was filled with decaying seals. Near the water hundreds of weakened pups bleated for their parents. Bob Rand, the zoologist, hurried to the island with other officials and a veterinary surgeon. They opened carcasses, searched for signs of disease, and took specimens away with them. The stench was so devastating that guano collecting stopped and the island was abandoned.

Some said that poachers had disturbed the herd and caused the mass emigration. Another theory was that shark fishers had laid nets round the island and caught so many seals that the survivors had departed; in panic. It was also suggested that the adults had followed shoals of small fish out of False Bay and had been feeding so greedily that they had forgotten their pups.

On the island not one full-grown seal remained. For three weeks some of the unweaned pups had contrived to keep alive, high and dry, without milk or food. Now they were left to their doom.

But a week after the island had been abandoned by the guano men the whole adult colony of seals returned. There they were, too late to save their pups, lolling in the winter sunshine

and playing in the sea. At last the true cause of the desertion became clear.

The seals had been driven away by the coloured labourers who had come to the island to scrape the guano. It was the old story of human interference. Penguins and seals do not live gladly side by side with man. On some islands, such as Sinclair's, the seals have come after a long period to tolerate the presence of man. Seal Island is inhabited for only a few weeks every year – an uneasy period for the seals although they are not hunted. The labourers must have irritated them by walking over the north end of the island too often. So the pups were sacrificed.

Looking back, I am surprised to find bird and animal life on Seal Island at all. For years it was used as a target by ships of the Royal Navy, and you can

still pick up rusty fragments of shells among the rocks. So it is possible to nurse an island back to life – but only when there is no human interference. I hope this lesson will be remembered before the penguin becomes extinct.

Seal Island is beneath the notice of the Gamtoos. But a hundred miles further east, at Dyer's Island beyond Hermanus, is an anchorage the Gamtoos knows well. Dyer's Island produces anything up to seven hundred tons of duiker guano a year, though it may drop to thirty tons when the capricious duikers settle elsewhere; and the reef called Geyser Island a hundred yards away has a colony of at least seven thousand seals.

Sampson Dyer was an American negro who arrived at the Cape early last century. At that time no one had

landed on the island; the surf breaks heavily on the mainland beach, and it takes a good man to skipper a whale-boat through that broken water to the island. Dyer, according to the Colonial Office archives, led the first party of seal hunters. I have seen this low white island referred to as Diaz Island, but there is nothing to link it with the Portuguese explorer.

Shaped like a coffin and nowhere more than ten feet above sea-level, Dyer's Island is indeed a dangerous place. Several of the daring sealing crews of last century were drowned in the surf. Ships have been lost here, too, barques, schooners, cutters; while the famous Birkenhead troopship wreck occurred ten miles away off Danger Point.

Dyer's Island has provided the guano department with one of the traditional

island families, like the d'Almeidas of Dassen. Frikkie Andrews, headman of Dyer's for many years, had three sons and a grandson in the island service. Frikkie's Bay, opposite the island and one of the finest fishing spots in South Africa, was named after the original Andrews.

Almost every summer the shoals of leaping tuna pass close to Dyer's Island – the hundred-pounder yellow-fins and the enormous blue-fin variety. These cavalcades of the world's most sporting fish are accompanied by sea-birds and sharks; they, and the tunny, all feed on myriads of sardines and the water boils and seethes round the island while this frantic feast is in progress. The island men take their shark lines and enjoy the pastime of wealthy Californians free of charge.

There is a penguin colony on Dyer's Island, and another sad episode in the penguin story was recorded there. The American tanker Esso Wheeling was wrecked on the coast thirty miles away in November 1948, and the oil lay heavily on the sea for weeks afterwards. Oil means starvation and death to sea-birds. Oil closed in thickly round Dyer's Island, and soon the bewildered penguins were struggling-back to their rookeries with their coats clogged. It was the hatching season. Parent penguins were unable to go fishing and so the young ones starved. Moreover, the oil had the queer effect of preventing the adult penguins from shaking off the sea-water; they suffered from cold for the first time in their lives and many perished.

Strenuous efforts were made by officials to save as many penguins as

possible. Mr. T. L. Kruger, the superintendent, took charge of a relief expedition which landed with drums of chemicals and attempted to remove the oil from the stricken birds. It was found, however, that the solvents destroyed not only the waste oil but also the natural waterproof oil secreted by the penguins. The officials watched the treated birds entering the water and saw them sinking. Fortunately the other birds of the island, gannets and cormorants, soon learnt to avoid the deadly oil and ranged beyond the danger zone in search of fish.

South Africa's best-known sealing-rock is the tiny granite islet in Mossel Bay. When the mail boats put in there, passengers are invited to steam round the islet in a tug. The skipper blows the siren at the right moment and the frightened seals plunge over the rocks

into the water. Thousands of trippers have felt that this spectacle was worth the fare.

For years the harbour authorities made so much money out "of shilling fares that they were reluctant to allow sealing. It was the only island on the coast controlled by the railway and harbour administration. Back in 1920 the fishermen complained so effectively about the appetites of the seals that hunting was permitted; and the herd on the rock was reduced from three thousand to two hundred. The survivors did not abandon the rock, however, and nine years later they were back to full strength and devouring as much fish as ever. They lived on there, hunted from time to time, within two miles of the docks, close to a holiday resort, disturbed at regular intervals by the hooting of tugs. And

under such conditions they multiply. But to my mind the significant fact is that no human being lives on the islet.

At one time the skins of adult seals from Mossel Bay were sent to London. There the furriers paid £3 apiece and turned them into sleeping-bags, caps, muffs, and even cheap fur-coats.

A recent sealing expedition pitched tents on the beach at Mossel Bay, lit fires under the blubber pot and prepared for the raid on the islet. It may have been coincidence, it may have been deep cunning – but on the day of the raid not one seal remained on the rock. And the seals did not return until the disgusted hunters had departed.

As a rule, the men land with rifles and secure a large haul on the first day – often as many as 120 seals. Next day

the seals will be shy, and sixty will represent a good bag. After that it is only possible to land a few snipers, who hide on the islet and pick off a few seals from time to time.

One of the Mossel Bay seal hunters described to me the most dangerous incident he had ever seen on the islet. A member of the party was swept off a rock while landing and raised his arm for help. His nearest companion extended a rifle, and with this aid the man clambered back to safety. Only then did the rescued man discover that the rifle was loaded. Moreover, the helper had kept his finger on the trigger the whole time.

I have already mentioned Mr. Charles Mussared, chief engineer of the Gamtoos, artist and inventor. When the ship was in Mossel Bay late in

1949, Mr. Mussared went off to Seal Islet with the hunters.

“Some of the seals carried their young down to the sea in their mouths, exactly as a cat carries her kittens,” Mr. Mussared told me. “My mind, however, was occupied with a design for a plant to convert seal meat into dehydrated, granulated meat meal. The experts had told me it was impossible. I made the outfit on board the Gamtoos and succeeded in producing the meat meal.”

Flushed by this achievement, Mr. Mussared next attempted to save money for the Union Government by using seal carcasses as fuel for the ship's boilers. He worked up to a little more than half-speed. Mr. Mussared dislikes any kind of waste, and it is possible that he will do for South African sealing what other inventive

minds have done for the Chicago meat-packing industry.

Last of the Cape guano isles are those in Algoa Bay, two of them within sight of the huge Port Elizabeth plants where American cars are assembled for the South African market. These two are St. Croix and Jahleel.

St Croix lies close to the shore. Until recently historians identified it as the isle where, in 1488, Bartholomew Diaz had placed one of his stone crosses before sailing back to Portugal. The island received its name for that reason; and one expedition after another searched St. Croix for the missing padrao. Not a fragment could be found.

Then a young South African historian, Dr. Eric Axelsson, went to Lisbon and

searched the archives and libraries for further clues. At last he found a copy of an early sixteenth-century manuscript which gave accurate details of the site of the padrao. Axelson returned to Algoa Bay, measured the leagues along the coast, and came to a headland to the east of St. Croix – a place called False Island, which looked like an island but was actually joined to the shore. And there on a cliff, and in a sea pool below, he discovered the lost monument.

St. Croix clings to its name, though it does not deserve it. Last century so many sailing-ships were driven on shore in Algoa Bay that a hut was put up for castaways on St. Croix.

It is only ten miles from the town, but men perished on the waterless island before help could reach them. If only they had known it, they could have

scooped fresh water out of the sea close to the island; for an underground river floods up to the surface there.

Gannets and a few penguins live undisturbed on St. Croix, and there is enough wild spinach and moss to support a small colony of rabbits. An attempt was made to gather the guano a few years ago, but it proved unprofitable. The neighbouring Jahleel Island, named after a bygone admiral, Sir Jahleel Brenton, is another bare rock without a large enough bird population to make the guano industry worthwhile.

To the east, thirty-six miles from Port Elizabeth, is the little group of rocks and reefs known as the Bird Islands. Here the Doddington went down nearly two centuries ago, and her treasure chests were hauled on the island. This was another of those age-

old guano deposits which provided a poor man with an unexpected fortune.

Before the Ichaboe discovery the Bird Islands were let by public tender for fishing and sealing. John Owen Smith held the contract in 1844; and when the government realized the value of the guano, Smith maintained that his rights covered everything on the islands. The government offered him £25,000 to clear out. Smith remained adamant. In the end the lawyers arranged that Smith should collect the guano for fifty years and share the proceeds equally with the government.

It was estimated that one hundred thousand tons of guano had accumulated on Bird Island. This proved to be an exaggeration. Moreover, the old deposit had lost much of its value as a fertiliser, and had to be mixed with the new crop before it could be sold.

Nevertheless, Smith and afterwards his widow received more than £50,000 before the islands reverted entirely to the government. Revenue from the government's share in the guano went to the Port Elizabeth Harbour Board, and many early improvements in the dock area were financed in this way.

There has been a lighthouse on Bird Island since 1852, and I have studied the diary of the first keeper, William Newton. Although there was a flourishing port not far away, Newton was often forgotten. He sent letters by American whalers, and sometimes he had to implore the authorities to send him provisions and oil for the light. Newton had his family with him, so that his anxiety can be imagined.

After two years on the island Newton complained that he had only received

ten sheep. "The regular transmission of rations would be a matter of the greatest possible consideration to me, situated as I am on a barren rock with no means of securing the necessary supplies of life," he wrote. "I have occasionally been reduced to very great distress and have been obliged at an exorbitant rate to purchase provisions from vessels touching at the island."

Not long afterwards Newton had to send out another desperate appeal. "I am entirely without tea, coffee, sugar, rice and soup," he declared. "I beg you, sir, to let my stores come down with the oil."

Newton applied for an official assistant in 1856. "For four years I have paid a person from my private means the sum of £20 per annum, besides his board, to attend to the

lantern in case of sickness, as mishap may befall me."

When the brig *Friend* was lost on the island with a full cargo of guano in 1858, Newton went to the rescue and saved the captain's wife and child and some of the crew. He risked his life, for the brig was lying on her beam-ends among the racks. During the following year Newton saw, to his astonishment, the French brig *Fenlay* running with a fair wind between Bird Island and the neighbouring penguin rookery known as Stag Island. He signalled "rocks ahead", but the Frenchman took no notice. The ship ran aground, but the weather was so calm that she drifted off next day with little damage.

Eight years after taking up his post on the island poor Newton was still beseeching the authorities to send him

regular supplies. "I have no springs, and have to trust to, the rainwater that is caught on the rocks," he wrote. "I had to send my wife from the island last year on account of not having water. If I could have the right to all the island produce except the guano – viz. eggs, fish and feathers – I could get a boat and crew and keep in touch with the mainland."

This request was turned down, and next we find Newton applying for commission on guano shipped. "My wife and I have been ill for some time, and I thought she would have died," he declared in support of his application. "I need a water tank. My son had to pay £7 for a boat to bring down provisions three months ago, or we should have starved. You know that I cannot afford to pay it out of £80 per annum."

At the end of fourteen years on the island Newton gave up this thankless task. The modern settlement on Bird Island consists of a dozen white people – the lighthouse-keepers and guano headman and their families. No doubt Newton would regard them as a pampered community; for they have a radio telephone and tugs are sent when medical emergencies arise. Before the radio there was a pigeon post.

Nevertheless, only those with the right temperament can stand long periods in the Bird Island solitude. The wife of one lighthouse-keeper developed melancholia after her children had gone to boarding-school in Port Elizabeth. She threw herself into a well and was drowned.

Some years ago all three lighthouse-keepers put out one evening to assist a fishing-boat in distress. In spite of

their efforts, boat and crew were lost. Then the keepers found they were unable to reach Bird Island against the wind and sea.

On the island the three wives waited. Imbued with the lighthouse tradition, they suppressed their terror and attempted to set the mechanism going before darkness fell. When they found that they could not operate the proper burners, they carried their household paraffin lamps into the tower and all that ghastly night they pushed the lenses round by hand. Soon after dawn the wind dropped and the exhausted keepers were able to regain the island.

That was one of the desperate adventures Bird Island has seen. But for the classic episode of human courage and resource on that isolated spot one goes back inevitably to the wreck of the Doddington nearly two centuries ago.

The anchor and a rusting gun from that ill-fated East Indiaman still lie on the beach near the lighthouse.

There were 220 souls on board the Doddington when she left England in April 1755, bound for India. She rounded the Cape of Good Hope safely and steered east; but she was set inshore by the current and struck Bird Island at night.

Only the quarterdeck remained above the water when those below scrambled on deck. The rest of the ship was being swept by heavy seas, and already many of the ship's company had been drowned. Nevertheless, the wreck lay very close to the island, and altogether twenty-three survivors reached the beach. William Webb, the third mate, left a description of the whole disaster in a diary which has been preserved. Among the survivors were Evan

Jones, the mate, John Collet, second mate, S. Powell, fifth mate, Richard Toppiag, the carpenter, two quarter-masters named Rothwell and Chrisholm, and Thomas Arnold, a black.

Webb's diary was written in the flowery and often tedious English of the period. He declared that on landing the survivors "burst into passionate exclamations and looked around them in all the wildness of despair." The wretched men tried to light a fire by rubbing pieces of wood, but failed to produce a spark. They would certainly have perished if a number of useful articles had not been cast ashore from, the Doddington. First they found two gun-flints and a broken file; then a linen rag which they dried and used as tinder; and a cask of gunpowder with some of its contents dry.

So they had a fire at last. Then came a box of wax candles and a case of brandy, a cask of fresh water and another of salt pork, seven live hogs, casks of flour and barrels of beer. The twenty-three Robinson Crusoes breathed again. Enough canvas had been washed up to give them shelter, and they sank down on the guano and tried to sleep.

In the morning Topping the carpenter declared that if they could find him the tools he would build a sloop. That put fresh heart into the weary men. They searched the island beaches, discovered a scraper, files, gimlets, sail-needles, a compass-card, two quadrants, three sword-blades and – most valuable of all – a carpenter's adze. The search also revealed a chest of money and government and Company's documents; these were put

aside by the officers and all hands were warned that the treasure was not to be touched.

They would have set about their boat-building task immediately but for a tragic incident. The body of Mrs Collet, wife of the second mate, came in with the surf. Collet, fortunately, was not present. Jones, the mate, found him in another part of the island and held him in conversation while the others dug a grave and read the burial service from a French prayer book found on the body. A few days later Collet was given his wife's wedding-ring and told the news. Stricken with grief, he spent many days piling flat stones on the grave until he had raised a large monument. On the summit he placed an elm plank inscribed with his wife's name and age and an account of the wreck.

Meanwhile the carpenter had improvised a saw. He still lacked nails; but the Swedish blacksmith, John Scanty, made a bellows, set up a forge using part of the bower anchor as anvil, and produced all the nails, chisels, axes and hammers required for the work. It was a triumph of ingenuity, but there were fine craftsmen among the old-time sailormen. One wonders whether a modern crew could achieve so much.

Early in August the stores from the wreck were almost exhausted. Rations were reduced to two ounces of bread a day for each man. They kept the salt pork for the voyage they were planning, and lived on the food resources of the island. Webb's diary gives a picture of the life of the castaways:

“Got 86 gulls’ eggs. Discovered a little salt upon the racks, and upon further search found about a pound.

“Caught 17 fish and a shark. Got 12 firkins of eggs.

“Knocked down several birds for their livers, being the best part for eating. They are very much like the gannets, eat filthy, and their flesh is very black.

“This day fed on a small green vegetable, growing from a small seed, like a pepper-corn, which the birds void, and it shoots up from their dung.

“Today lived on young seals. Seven of our people taken sick, and judged it owing to their eating hearty of the abovementioned food.”

They dug a well to conserve the winter rainfall, knowing that this supply and pools in the rocks would be all they

could rely on when summer arrived. Attempts were made to cure fish and birds by smoking, but the results were not very palatable. Once they tried to make salt in a copper vessel. This produced verdigris, which caused illness among those who, had eaten the salt.

After nearly seven weeks on the island the Doddington’s men sighted a great smoke on the mainland. They signalled back that night with a huge fire, thinking that a rescue expedition had been sent from the Cape; and next day three men rowed across in a little dinghy which had been saved from the wreck. It would have been better if they had remained on the island. One man was drowned when the dinghy capsized in the surf; the others found his body later, mangled by a wild beast. These two, men encountered

savages who threatened them with spears and stripped off their clothes. They waited for the surf to go down and returned thankfully to the island.

While they were away the carpenter – the key-man of the island – had cut his leg with the adze. The surgeon had been lost with the Doddington, and the carpenter nearly bled to death. Fortunately the wound healed and the boat-building went on.

The next incident recorded in Webb's journal occurred one Sunday after prayers. The officer discovered that the treasure chest had been broken open and most of the money carried away and hidden. "On a ship being lost, all the sailors lose their wages and whatever is cast ashore, is considered by the sailors common property," Webb remarked. "Everybody denied knowing anything of it.

Mr. James Collet and myself consulted about a proper method to bring it to light, and agreed to write down the form of an oath and administer it separately to everyone, Mr. Jones to be first. But it was objected to by a great majority, so the matter rested for this time."

During the early part of their stay the castaways noticed that the gannets would sometimes settle on the island like a vast cloud. Then they would disappear for days at a stretch. Early in October the gannets returned to lay their eggs, and for three months there was an abundant supply.

It was not until the middle of February 1756 that the sloop was completed. They launched her at high water and named her Happy Deliverance. "Thank God, with the lift of the sea we got her off and ran her over the bar,"

wrote Webb. "Left the barren rock, which we named Bird Island, having on board two butts and four hogsheads of water, two live hogs, one firkin of butter, about four pounds of biscuits a man, and ten days' salt provisions at about two ounces a day per man, but quite rotten and decayed."

For four months they sailed eastwards along the coast in the Happy Deliverance. At times they anchored and gave the natives brass buttons, nails and copper hoops for oxen and corn. On the banks of a river (probably the Umzimvubu) they met a youth, twelve to fourteen years of age, perfectly white with European features. They tried to learn his history, but failed completely.

At last the Happy Deliverance sailed into Delagoa Bay and found the English ship Rose at anchor there. The

officers of the Doddington were now able to search the sloop without interference from the crew.

Some of the money was recovered. Some still lies on Bird Island where it was buried by the man who broke open the money chest. Treasure hunters dug up the island last century without success. All they accomplished was the destruction of the stone memorial raised by the unhappy John Collet over his wife's grave.

Chapter 16

PANTHER HEAD

IT DOES not seem ten months since I steamed inshore at dawn on board the Gamtoos and watched the sun making a silhouette of Panther Head. Yet this is January 1950, I am travelling in another ship, and again the “Coast of Dead Ned” is abeam.

This time it is the twin-screw motor-coaster Baltic Coast which is carrying me past the old landmarks. I am bound for the Congo, and the desert coast is a mere interlude in a voyage to the tropics. Yet it grips me again and sets my memories racing; and I know that the green Congo shores will never stir me like this.

Panther Head is further away this time.

I can hardly make out the ridge of Sinclair’s Island, but it is sharp

enough in my mind. I am thinking of an amusing story one of the headmen told me. Between seasons on Sinclair’s when the island was abandoned some years ago, the door of the labourers’ bunk-house blew open. When the men occupied the island months later there were seals in all the bunks, including the high top-bunks – whiskered seals gazing in amazement at the intruders, like a lot of old shellbacks whose rest had been disturbed. It took days to get that room shipshape.

Bob Rand, I remember, has a theory about the original naming of this isle which was his home for eighteen months. As you know, it was Roast Beef Island on the early charts, until Captain Benjamin Sinclair came along; and Rand thinks the men who put it on the charts were spending

Christmas at sea, thinking wistfully of roast beef and plum pudding. That may be correct, but I can still see a strong resemblance to a plum pudding in Plumpudding Island.

Sinclair's Island is where the young cormorants rest during their annual migration northwards in January every year. Though seals cover most of the fifteen acres, Rand found many other bird visitors on ledges and in crevices. Palearctic waders in spring, wagtails and oystercatchers, eared grebes foraging in the bay, skuas and petrels, sandwich terns, Damara terns in stormy weather, swift terns in summer. If you know your birds, each day in solitude is a day of discovery.

I am reminded inevitably of Black Sophie as I gaze again upon the sea-swept rock bearing her name. She gave her famous parties almost up to

the end of the last century, and then retired from the waterfront to live in Primrose Street, Cape Town – a queer, quiet address for such a woman. There she died on November 15, 1904, at the age of seventy-seven. Her funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Cape Town. No doubt the mourners gathered in the Bree Street bars afterwards and talked of her. It makes me sad to think of the tales that have been lost in this world, stories told vividly in bars, told and forgotten. Who remembers Black Sophie now? Perhaps the Black Sophie's of this world ought to be forgotten as soon as possible, but her name is on the chart. I wish I could have listened to the stories in the Bree Street bars after Black Sophie's funeral.

Von Raath, the Austrian deserter from the Alabama, outlived Black Sophie –

though I doubt whether he was among the mourners. He settled on a lonely part of the Cape coast, at Northumberland Point, and spent the rest of his life as a beachcomber. All sorts of flotsam drifts ashore there. It is said that more bodies of people drowned at sea have been found at Northumberland Point than anywhere else in Africa. So a cemetery was made, and in his old age von Raath drew a small retainer from the Cape Government for tending the graves. That was a career he could never have envisaged when he drank and sang at Black Sophie's party that night in 1863 – and refused Jack Gove's offer of a passage to the islands.

Look back, as I am looking back now from the deck of the Baltic Coast, and you will realize that the whole of this coast is strewn with skeletons. I heard

a tale from one of the old hands that is typical of the remorseless “Coast of Dead Ned”. It was the tale of the cutter Mayflower, chartered from a Cape Town firm in 1905 by Captain Andreas Hesboe for a seal-poaching venture. She was a tiny packet, no more than thirty tons, manned by five fearless Scandinavians.

Everyone knew the Mayflower was going poaching, and Gus Hagstrom (the ill-fated Possession Island headman who became a drug addict) was instructed to keep a sharp look-out for her. Hagstrom sent a Hottentot over to the mainland as a scout, and the Hottentot rowed back and reported that a cutter was lying at anchor off Long Island. He was sent back to keep watch. The next thing the Hottentot found was the body of a white man on the beach near Long Island.

Hagstrom went himself next time. The jackals had been busy, and there was only a skeleton. Further down the beach he discovered oars, a water-cask, and a cook's galley which he identified as the Mayflower's galley. That was the end of Hesboe's poaching venture; it was the end of Hesboe, too, and his five men. That was long ago. But every year the "Coast of Dead Ned" has claimed more and more victims – old pearling luggers, fine yachts, craft built for all sorts of purposes. The sand is strewn with their bones.

My ship swings in past Diaz Point to anchor in the Luderitz lagoon – like the Sea Bird that time when the Germans were waiting to open fire on Captain Burr. I am on shore again in the port of the islands. As usual, I call on old Herr Eberlanz, who knows

more secrets of the sands than any other man in the place.

Herr Eberlanz shows me an ancient sword of oriental design, a rusty French bayonet, cowrie shells which can only have come from the East Indies, eighteenth-century coins. And he tells me another tale of death on the "Coast of Dead Ned".

As you know, Luderitz stands in a blistering wilderness and all its drinking water is condensed from the sea. But up the coast to the north, about twenty miles away, an underground river meanders down to the sea. Anachab, they call this spot where the sandy river-bed reaches the coast; I have seen the bushes growing along the river course. Fresh water comes to the surface there.

So in the German days a gardener named Wollmerstedt took it into his head to cultivate the Anachab oasis. He grew a crop of Lucerne, and raised flowers and vegetables. One day he startled the people of Luderitz by trudging into the town with pack-donkeys laden with farm produce. He sold it easily enough and set off again along the desert coast with his well-earned money. That was the last time anyone saw Wollmerstedt. There was a rumour, of course, that he had discovered the “Bushman’s Paradise” and diamonds worth millions, and had departed secretly to end his days in luxury. But less romantic people knew better. Wollmerstedt left his bones in the desert.

Sometimes the cruel “Coast of Dead Ned” disables its victims and lets them go. I heard a sad story which had only

just reached its climax; the story of a prospector who spent his life in the Namib, now in search of diamonds, then copper; after decades of frustration he went after diamonds again. This time he found them – not gem stones, but the small, ugly diamonds used in industry. He shovelled them up in such quantities on the coast north of Ichaboe that within a few weeks his fortune was made. It came too late. Those years in the blinding, sand laden wilderness had affected his eyesight. He is not totally blind, but I am afraid he will never see a diamond sparkle again.

Luderitz raises a thirst, and inevitably I find myself in the cheerful Europa-hof bar – a bar near the waterfront where all the strange tales of land and sea are told sooner or later. And this noon I am fortunate indeed. My old

friends of the guano island have come over from Penguin Island in the Pikkewyn; they are sitting on high stools with long glasses of draught lager before them. They have been all the way from Panther Head to Hollam's Bird since last I saw them, and as they talk I can see it all.

I can see them clambering up the slippery ledges to take the seals unawares; handling their surf-boats in jagged gulch ways; landing precariously on dangerous beaches and filling the flat booms with sacks of guano. They have built jetties and stores and water-tanks on far islands, and solid houses where only huts had stood before.

"Remember those men the Gamtoos took to Mercury when you were on board?" asks Aleck Fourie, skipper of the Pikkewyn. "One of them fell into

the 'Glory Hole' - they never saw him again."

So that grim cavern still takes toll of the labourers on the island that shakes. Which man, I wonder? The one with the carnival trousers, perhaps, who came aboard carefree with a guitar slung over his shoulder. No doubt he clutched at the iron bars as he fell; but they were too far apart and he went on into the funnel that no man has explored. Mister Milo's words come back to me. "A queer place to die, eh?"

There is news of Mister Milo in the Europahof bar. He has sold the little farm outside Cape Town for £10,000, the place he bought for a few hundreds when he retired from the islands. And he has married and gone to live in a brand-new home called "Rapallo" (after his birthplace) at Bellville. That

seems to round off an unusual life, but I have not done with him yet.

I wanted to hear more of Jack Merrylees, the London tea merchant who lived in solitude on Halifax Island. In the end, all that I learned was something I should have guessed. Merrylees, indeed! But just the name a humorist would invent when he decided to leave the past over the horizon.

Merrylees was one of the few educated men who stuck to the islands. The doctors, lawyers and army officers pulled out and vanished into the cities. Whether they went back to the bottle is not recorded; no doubt some did and others did not. There was an island labourer who inherited £25,000 and a ranch in Canada. He invited the whole gang to come and stay with him. But most of the old hands died in poverty.

They had their moments, their spree and wild adventures; and thrift was seldom preached on the islands.

It has taken me nearly a year, and another voyage, to discover the secret of those lost men who clung to the islands year after year. Queer how an idea goes down into the cellar of the subconscious mind and comes up, mature and vivid; not summoned up, but bursting out because of the sight of old haunts and the smell of the ocean round Ichaboe.

One place was very much the same as another to, the lost men, whether it was fo'c's'le or busy waterfront or far island. They were not gipsies, neither were they exiles. Some of them at least must have had peace in their hearts. They took peace to the islands with them and they stayed. Ichaboe was Mister Milo's true home, and

before that Jack Gove's true home. Sometimes they departed like the birds, but always they returned. Those old hands loved the islands.

I am leaving Luderitz in the late afternoon. It is blowing hard from the south now as the Baltic Coast slashes out of the harbour with the spray whipping her bridge.

But it is a golden afternoon. The ship turns northwards, and I am alone and thinking of the islands. To starboard the sky over the "Coast of Dead Ned" is blue, then rose-coloured – just above the yellow desert dunes; and at last, far away to starboard, there is Ichaboe, the white island set in the deep South Atlantic blue.

There is Ichaboe and the birds. A little earlier the gannets had been hovering

over the stern like small albatrosses; sweeping over the foredeck, resting on the crosstrees. Now they are birds with a set purpose. No longer are they riding the white-caps, skimming the wave-tops, quartering the sea for fish or weaving round the ship..

This is the hour of the swift return. Away to starboard there on Ichaboe millions are greeting their mates, millions preening their feathers. The island is alive with them, gleaming white in the last of the sun. Now the stragglers are forsaking the mighty freedom of blue water, instinct urging them to take their places in the ranks of the tightly packed millions.

They are heading for Ichaboe as accurately as aircraft coming home on the radio beam. Orderly and majestic is their flight at this hour as they pour in from the horizon in vast white

armies. Throughout the ages this has been the evening scene off Ichaboe, the incarnation of poetry, a mood passed on by feathered nomads to, the spellbound human watcher, a mood and a spectacle and a profound experience.

Nature has nothing finer. I have come here for this, and suddenly I am aware that Jack Gove stayed here for this. Jack Gove and Mister Milo after him, living for a century on a white rock in the blue ocean with the wind on their tanned faces and the wonder of the birds before their eyes.

THE END

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Captain C. H. **Jackson**

(Barque) **Jessie**

(Coaster) **Karatara**

Captain William **Kidd**

T. L. **Kruger**

Frank **Kuhl**

(Schooner) **Lars Riisdahl**

Andrew **Livingstone**

Long Island

Churchill **Louwrens**

Adolf **Luderitz**

(Port) **Luderitz**

S.S. **Magnet**

Admiral Sir John **Marshall**

Marshall Rock

(Second Officer) **Matthews**

Medicine chests (island)

Mercury Island

John **Merrylees**

Dr. H. R. **Mill**

Morrell's Island (Elephant Rock)

Sir Alexander **Muir-Mackenzie**

Captain Alfred George **Murton**

Mr. R. A. **Murton**

Charles **Mussared**

(Coaster) **Nautilus**

Captain Sigrid **Nielsen**

North Long Island

(Wreck) **Otavi**

(Yacht) **Our Boy**

(Steam-barge) **Outeniqua**

German gunboat **Panther**

Panther Head
Captain Heinrich **Parow**
Captain Johann **Parow**
Pelicans
H.M.S. **Pelorus**
Penguin Island
Penguins
Dr. Louis **Peringuey**
(Motor cutter) **Pikkewyn**
Jack **Ployer**
Plumpudding Island
Pomona Island
Portuguese explorers
Possession Island
(Inspector) Mr. **Price**

(Coaster) **Ranza**
President **Ryan**

Saddle Hill

Saldanha Bay
Sandwich Harbour
Captain H. L. **Scharmberg**
Scurvy
(Schooner) **Sea Bird**
Seabirds
Seal hair mystery (Possession)
Seal Island
Seals
Captain Raphael **Semmes**
Shark Island
(Cable steamer) **Sherard Osborn**
Shipwrecked crews
Sinclair's Island
Slop chest
(Wreck) **Solingen**
South Long Island
Spencer Bay
Sperrgebiet
Staple Rock

Stephan brothers

Carl **Stephan**

Stores (island)

Strandloppers

H.M.S. **Terpsichore**

(Pinnacle) **Theodora**

Thesen family

Oscar **Thesen**

Captain Charlie **Towns**

Treasure

Mr. F. **Truter**

Jimmy **Tulloch**

Captain H. C. **van Delden**

Heinrich **Vogelsang**

Von Raath

Captain M. B. **Wade**

(Schooner) **Wasp**

Skipper E. M. **Wearin**

Wolf Bay

Xema (treasure ship)

Zweispitz Bay